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Galaxy

Science Fiction

JOHN VARLEY • *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance*

J. E. Pournelle **Spider Robinson** **Roger Zelazny**

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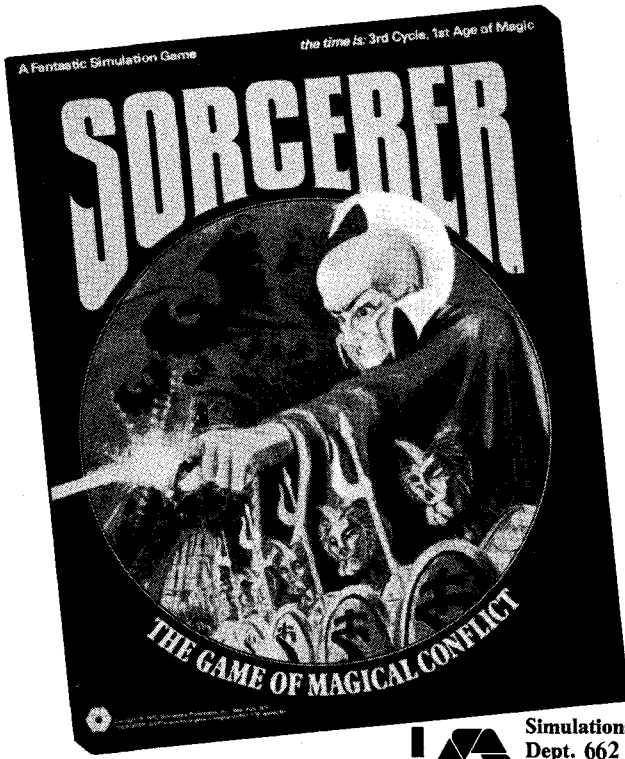

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J. E. Pournelle, Ph.D., *Science Editor*
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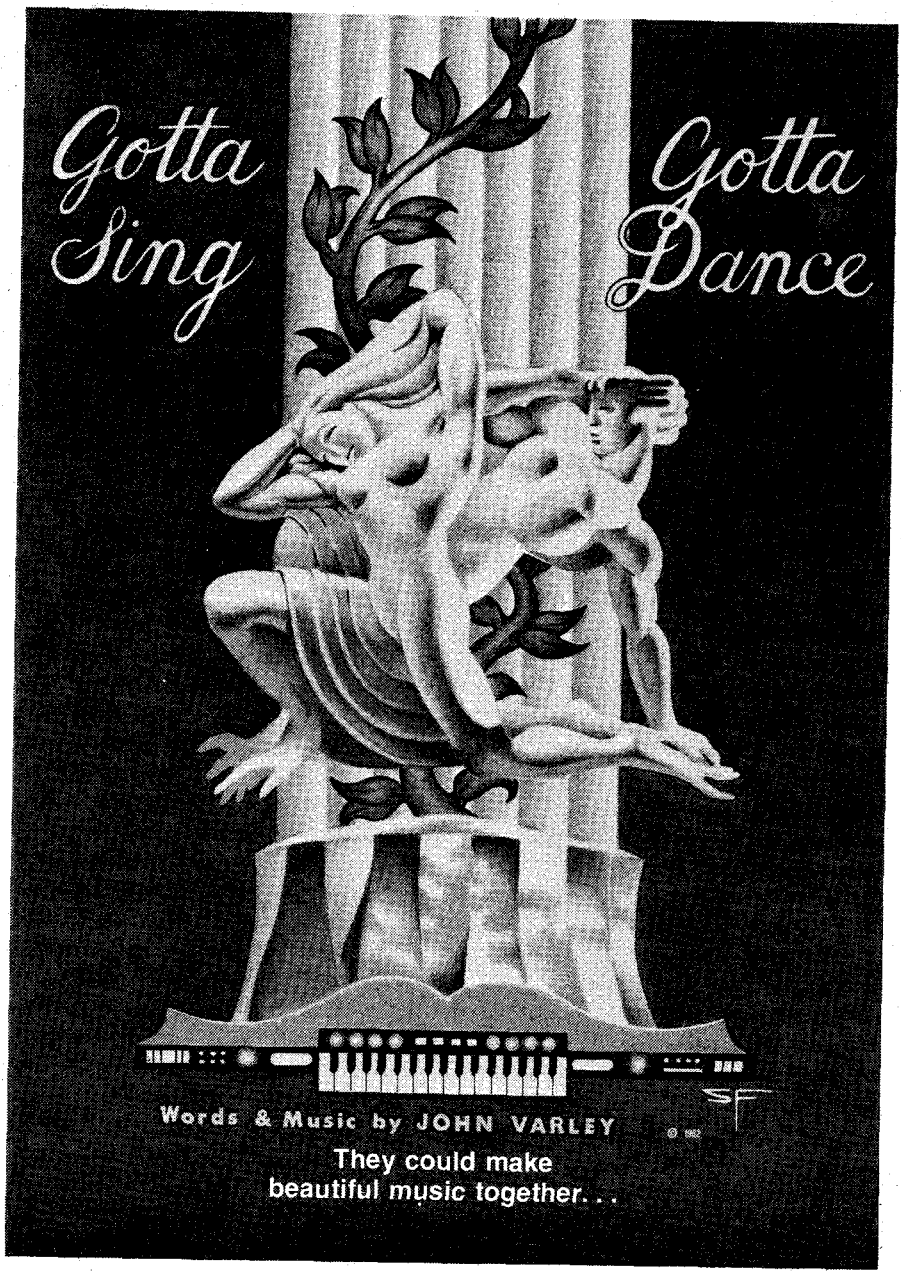

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SAILING IN toward a rendezvous with Janus, Barnum and Bailey encountered a giant, pulsing quarter-note. The stem was a good five kilometers tall. The note itself was a kilometer in diameter, and glowed a faint turquoise. It turned ponderously on its axis as they approached it.

"This must be the place," Barnum said to Bailey.

"Janus approach-control to Barnum and Bailey," came a voice from the void. "You will encounter the dragline on the next revolution. You should be seeing the visual indicator in a few minutes."

Barnum looked down at the slowly turning, irregular ball of rock and ice that was Janus, innermost satellite of Saturn. Something was coming up behind the curve of the horizon. It didn't take long for enough of it to become visible so they could see what it was. Barnum had a good laugh.

"Is that yours, or theirs?" he asked Bailey.

Bailey sniffed. "Theirs. Just how silly do you think I am?"

The object rising behind the curve of the satellite was a butterfly net, ten kilometers tall. It had a long, fluttering net trailing from a gigantic hoop. Bailey sniffed again, but applied the necessary vectors to position them for being swooped up in the preposterous thing.

"Come on, Bailey," Barnum chided. "You're just jealous because you didn't think of it first."

"Maybe so," the symb conceded. "Anyway, hold onto your hat, this is likely to be quite a jerk."

The illusion was carried as far as was practical, but Barnum noticed that the first tug of deceleration started sooner than one would expect if the transparent net was more than an illusion. The force built up gradually as the electromagnetic field clutched at the metal belt he had strapped around his waist. It lasted for about a minute. When it had trailed off, Janus no longer appeared to rotate beneath them. It was growing closer.

"Listen to this," Bailey said. Barnum's head was filled with music. It was bouncy, featuring the reedy, flatulent, yet still engaging tones of a bass saxophone in a honky-tonk tune that neither of them could identify. They shifted position and could just make out the location of Pearly Gates, the only human settlement on Janus. It was easy to find because of the weaving, floating musical staffs that extruded themselves from the spot like parallel strands of spider web.

The people who ran Pearly Gates were a barrel of laughs. All the actual structures that made up the above-ground parts of the settlement were disguised behind whimsical holographic projections. The whole place looked like a cross between a child's candy-land nightmare and an early Walt Disney cartoon.

Dominating the town was a giant

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calliope with pipes a thousand meters tall. There were fifteen of them, and they all were bouncing and swaying in time to the saxophone music. They would squat down as if taking a deep breath, then stand up again, emitting a colored smoke ring. The buildings, which Barnum knew were actually functional, uninteresting hemispheres, appeared to be square houses with flowerboxes in the windows and cartoon eyes peering out the doors. They trembled and jigged as if they were made of jello.

"Don't you think it's a trifle overdone?" Bailey asked.

"Depends on what you like. It's kind of cute, in its own gaudy way."

They drifted in through the spaghetti maze of lines, bars, sixteenth notes, rests, smoke rings, and blaring music. They plowed through an insubstantial eighth-note run, and Bailey killed their remaining velocity with the jets. They lighted softly in the barely perceptible gravity and made their way to one of the grinning buildings.

* * *

Coming up to the entrance of the building had been quite an experience. Barnum had reached for a button marked LOCK CYCLE and it had dodged out of his way, then turned into a tiny face, leering at him. Practical joke. The lock had opened anyway, actuated by his presence. Inside, Pearly Gates was not so flamboyant. The corridors looked decently like corridors, and the floors were solid and gray.

"I'd watch out, all the same," Bailey advised, darkly. "These people are real self-panickers. Their idea of a good laugh might be to dig a hole in the floor and cover it with a holo. Watch your step."

"Aw, don't be such a sore loser. You could spot something like that, couldn't you?"

Bailey didn't answer, and Barnum didn't pursue it. He knew the source of the symb's uneasiness and dislike of the station on Janus. Bailey wanted to get their business over as soon as possible and get back to the Ring, where he felt needed. Here, in a corridor filled with oxygen, Bailey was physically useless.

Bailey's function in the symbiotic team of Barnum and Bailey was to provide an environment of food, oxygen, and water for the human, Barnum. Conversely, Barnum provided food, carbon dioxide, and water for Bailey. Barnum was a human, physically unremarkable except for a surgical alteration of his knees that made them bend outward rather than forward, and the oversized hands, called peds, that grew out of his ankles where his feet used to be. Bailey, on the other hand, was nothing like a human.

Strictly speaking, Bailey was not even a he. Bailey was a plant, and Barnum thought of him as a male

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only because the voice in his head that was Bailey's only means of communication sounded masculine. He had no shape of his own. He existed by containing Barnum and taking on part of his shape. He extended into Barnum's alimentary canal, in the mouth and all the way through to emerge at the anus, threading him like a needle. Together, the team looked like a human in a featureless spacesuit, with a bulbous head, a tight waist, and swollen hips. A ridiculously exaggerated female, if you wish.

"You might as well start breathing again," Bailey said.

"What for? I will when I need to talk to someone who's not paired with a symb. In the meantime, why bother?"

"I just thought you'd like to get used to it."

"Oh, very well. If you think it's necessary."

So Bailey gradually withdrew the parts of him that filled Barnum's lungs and throat, freeing his speech apparatus to do what it hadn't done for over ten years. Barnum coughed as the air flowed into his throat. It was cold! Well, it felt like it, though it was actually at the standard 72 degrees. He was unused to it. His diaphragm gave one shudder, then took over the chore of breathing as if his medulla had never been disconnected.

"There," he said aloud, surprised at how his voice sounded. "Satisfied?"

"It never hurts to do a little testing."

"Let's get this out in the open, shall we? I didn't want to come here any more than you did, but you know we had to. Are you going to give me trouble about it until we leave? We're supposed to be a team, remember?"

There was a mental sigh from his partner.

"I'm sorry, but that's just it. We *are* supposed to be a team, and out in the Ring we are. Neither of us is anything without the other. Here I'm just something you have to carry around. I can't walk, I can't talk; I'm revealed as the vegetable that I am."

Barnum was accustomed to the symb's periodic attacks of insecurity. In the Ring they never amounted to much. But when they entered a gravitational field Bailey was reminded of how ineffectual a being he was.

"Here you can breathe on your own," Bailey went on. "You could see on your own if I uncovered your eyes. By the way, do you . . ."

"Don't be silly. Why should I use my own eyes when you can give me a better picture than I could on my own?"

"In the Ring, that's true. But here all my extra senses are just excess mass. What good is an adjusted velocity display to you here? The farthest thing I can sense is twenty meters off, and stationary."

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"Listen you. Do you want to turn around and march back out that lock? We can. I'll do it if this is going to be such a trauma for you."

There was a long silence, and Barnum was flooded with a warm, apologetic sensation that left him weak at his splayed-out knees.

"There's no need to apologize," he went on in a more sympathetic tone. "I understand you. This is just something we have to do together, like everything else, the good along with the bad."

"I love you, Barnum."

"And you, silly."

★ ★ ★

The sign on the door read:

TYMPANI & RAGTIME
TINPANALLEYCATS

Barnum and Bailey hesitated outside the door.

"What are you supposed to do, knock?" Barnum asked out loud. "It's been so long I've forgotten how."

"Just fold your fingers into a fist and . . ."

"Not that." He laughed, dispelling his momentary nervousness. "I've forgotten the politenesses of human society. Well, they do it in all the tapes I ever saw." He knocked on the door and it opened by itself on the second rap.

There was a man sitting behind a desk with his bare feet propped up on it. Barnum had been prepared for the shock of seeing another human, one who was *not* enclosed in a symb, for he had encountered several of them on the way to the offices of Tympani and Ragtime. But he was still reeling from the unfamiliarity of it. The man seemed to realize it and silently gestured him to a chair. He sat down in it, thinking that in the low gravity it really wasn't necessary. But somehow he was grateful. The man didn't say anything for a long while, giving Barnum time to settle down and arrange his thoughts. He spent the time looking the man over carefully.

Several things were apparent about him; most blatently, he was not a fashionable man. Shoes had been virtually extinct for over a century for the simple reason that there was nothing to walk on but padded floors. However, current fashion decreed that Shoes Are Worn.

The man was young-looking, having halted his growth at around twenty years. He was dressed in a holo-suit, a generated illusion of flowing color that refused to stay in one spot or take on a definite form. Other than that, he might well have been nude, but Barnum couldn't tell.

"You're Barnum and Bailey, right?" the man said.

"Yes. And you're Tympani?"

"Ragtime. Tympani will be here later. I'm pleased to meet you. Have any trouble on the way down? This is your first visit, I think you said."

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"Yes, it is. No trouble. And thank you, incidentally, for the ferry fee."

He waved it away. "Don't concern yourself. It's all in the overhead. We're taking a chance that you'll be good enough to repay that many times over. We're right enough times that we don't lose money on it. Most of your people out there don't have the money to afford being landed on Janus, and then where would we be? We'd have to go out to you. Cheaper this way."

"I suppose it is." He was silent again. He noticed that his throat was beginning to get sore with the unaccustomed effort of talking. No sooner had the thought been formed than he felt Bailey go into action. The internal tendril that had been withdrawn flicked up out of his stomach and lubricated his larynx. The pain died away as the nerve endings were suppressed. It's all in your head, anyway, he told himself.

"Who recommended us to you?"

"Who . . . oh, it was . . . who was it, Bailey?" He realized too late that he had spoken it aloud. He hadn't wanted to, he had a vague feeling that it might be impolite to speak to his symb that way. Ragtime wouldn't hear the answer, of course.

"It was Antigone," Bailey supplied.

"Thanks," Barnum said, silently this time. "A man named Antigone," he told Ragtime.

The man made a note of that, and looked up again, smiling.

"Well now. What is it you wanted to show us?"

Barnum was about to describe their work to Ragtime when the door burst open and a woman sailed in. She sailed in the literal sense, banking off the door-jamb, grabbing at the door with her left ped and slamming it shut in one smooth motion, then spinning in the air to kiss the floor with the tips of her fingers, using them to slow her speed until she was stopped in front of the desk, leaning over it and talking excitedly to Ragtime. Barnum was surprised that she had peds instead of feet, thinking that no one used them in Pearly Gates. They made walking awkward. But she didn't seem interested in walking.

"Wait till you hear what Myers has done now!" she said, almost levitating in her enthusiasm. Her ped-fingers worked in the carpet as she talked. "He re-aligned the sensors in the right anterior ganglia, and you won't believe what it does to the . . ."

"We have a client, Tympani."

She turned and saw the symb-human pair sitting behind her. She put her hand to her mouth as if to hush herself, but she was smiling behind it. She moved over to them—it couldn't be called walking in the low gravity; she seemed to accomplish it by perching on two fingers of each of her peds and walking on them, which made it

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look like she was floating. She reached them and extended her hand.

She was wearing a holo suit like Ragtime's but instead of wearing the projector around her waist, as he did, she had it mounted on a ring. When she extended her hand, the holo generator had to compensate by weaving larger and thinner webs of light around her body. It looked like an explosion of pastels, and left her body barely covered. What Barnum saw could have been a girl of sixteen; lanky, thin hips and breasts and two blonde braids that reached to her waist. But her movements belied that. There was no adolescent awkwardness there.

"I'm Tympani," she said, taking his hand. Bailey was taken by surprise and didn't know whether to bare the hand or not. So what she grasped was Barnum's hand covered by the three-centimeter padding of Bailey. She didn't seem to mind.

"You must be Barnum and Bailey. Do you know who the original Barnum and Bailey were?"

"Yes, they're the people who built your big calliope outside."

She laughed. "The place *is* a kind of a circus, until you get used to it. Rag tells me you have something to sell us."

"I hope so."

"You've come to the right place. Rag's the business side of the company; I'm the talent. So I'm the one you'll be selling to. I don't suppose you have anything written down?"

He made a wry face, then remembered she couldn't see anything but a blank stretch of green with a hole for his mouth. It took some time to get used to dealing with people again.

"I don't even know how to read music."

She sighed, but didn't seem unhappy. "I figured as much. So few of you Ringers do. Honestly, if I could ever figure out what it is that turns you people into artists I could get rich."

"The only way to do that is to go out in the Ring and see for yourself."

"Right," she said, a little embarrassed. She looked away from the misshapen thing sitting in the chair. The only way to discover the magic of a life in the Ring was to go out there, and the only way to do that was to adopt a symb. Forever give up your individuality and become a part of a team. Not many people could do that.

"We might as well get started," she said, standing and patting her thighs to cover her nervousness. "The practice room is through that door."

He followed her in, to a dimly lit room that seemed to be half buried in paper. He hadn't realized that any business could require so much paper. Their policy seemed to be to stack it up and when the stack got too high and tumbled into a landslide, kick it back into a corner. Sheets of music crunched under his

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peds as he followed her to the corner of the room where the synthesizer keyboard stood beneath a lamp. The rest of the room was in shadows, but the keys gleamed brightly in their ancient array of black and white.

Tympani took off her ring and sat at the keyboard. "The damn holo gets in my way," she explained. "I can't see the keys." Barnum noticed for the first time that there was another keyboard on the floor, down in the shadows, and her peds were poised over it. He wondered if that was the only reason she wore them. Having seen her walk, he doubted it.

She sat still for a moment, then looked over to him expectantly.

"Tell me about it," she said in a whisper.

He didn't know what to say.

"Tell you about it? Just tell you?"

She laughed, and relaxed again, hands in her lap.

"I was kidding. But we have to get the music out of your head and onto that tape some way. How would you prefer? I heard that a Beethoven Symphony was once written out in English, each chord and run described in detail. I can't imagine why anyone would *want* to, but someone did. It made quite a thick book. We can do it that way. Or surely you can think of another." He was silent. Until she sat at the keyboard, he hadn't really thought about that part of it. He knew his music, knew it to the last hemi-semi-demi-quaver. How to get it out?

"What's the first note?" she prompted.

He was ashamed again. "I don't even know the names of the notes," he confessed.

She was not surprised. "Sing it."

"I . . . I've never tried to sing it."

"Try now." She sat up straight, looking at him with a friendly smile, not coaxing but encouraging.

"I can hear it," he said, desperately. "Every note, every dissonance . . . is that the right word?"

She grinned. "It's *a* right word, but I don't know if you know what it means. It's the quality of sound produced when the vibrations don't mesh harmoniously: *dis*chord, it doesn't produce a sonically pleasing chord. Like this:" and she pressed two keys close together, tried several others, then played with the knobs mounted over the keyboard until the two notes were only a few vibrations apart and wavered sinuously. "They don't automatically please the ear, but in the right context they can make you sit up and take notice. Is your music discordant?"

"Some places. Is that bad?"

"Not at all. Used right, it's . . . well, not pleasing exactly . . ." she spread her arms helplessly. "Talking about music is a pretty frustrating business, at best. Singing's much friendlier. Are you

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going to sing for me, love, or must I try to wade through your descriptions?''

Hesitantly, he sang the first three notes of his piece, knowing that they sounded nothing like the orchestra that crashed through his head but desperate to try something. She took it up, playing the three unmodulated tones on the synthesizer; three pure sounds that were pretty, but lifeless and light-years away from what he wanted.

''No, no, it has to be richer.''

''All right, I'll play what I think of as richer, and we'll see if we speak the same language.'' She turned some knobs and played the three notes again, this time giving them the modulations of a string bass.

''That's closer. But it's still not there.''

''Don't despair,'' she said, waving her hand at the bank of dials before her. ''Each of these will produce a different effect, singly or in combination. I'm reliably informed that the permutations are infinite. So somewhere in there we'll find your tune. Now. Which way should we go; this way, or this way?''

Twisting the knob she touched in one direction made the sound become tinnier; the other, brassier, with a hint of trumpets.

He sat up. That was getting closer still, but it lacked the richness of the sounds in his brain. He had her turn the knob back and forth, finally settled on the place that most nearly approached his phantom tune. She tried another knob, and the result was a still closer approach. But it lacked something.

Getting more and more involved, Barnum found himself standing over her shoulder as she tried another knob. That was closer still, but . . .

Feverishly, he sat beside her on the bench and reached out for the knob. He tuned it carefully, then realized what he had done.

''Do you mind?'' he asked. ''It's so much easier sitting here and turning them myself.''

She slapped him on the shoulder. ''You dope,'' she laughed. ''I've been trying to get you over here for the last fifteen minutes. Do you think I could really do this by myself? That Beethoven story was a lie.''

''What will we do, then?''

''What *you'll* do is fiddle with this machine, with me here to help you and tell you how to get what you want. When you get it right, I'll play it for you. Believe me, I've done this too many times to think you could sit over there and describe it to me. Now *sing!*''

He sang. Eight hours later Ragtime came quietly into the room and put a plate of sandwiches and a pot of coffee on the table beside them. Barnum was still singing, and the synthesizer was singing along with him.

★ ★ ★

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Barnum came swimming out of his creative fog, aware that something was hovering in his field of vision, interfering with his view of the keyboard. Something white and steaming, at the end of a long . . .

It was a coffe cup, held in Tympani's hand. He looked at her face and she tactfully said nothing.

While working at the synthesizer Barnum and Bailey had virtually fused into a single being. That was appropriate, since the music Barnum was trying to sell was the product of their joint mind. It belonged to both of them. Now he wrenched himself away from his partner, far enough away that talking to him became a little more than talking to himself.

"How about it, Bailey? Should we have some?"

"I don't see why not. I've had to expend quite a bit of water vapor to keep you cool in this place. It could stand replenishing."

"Listen, why don't you roll back from my hands? It would make it easier to handle those controls; give me finer manipulation, see? Besides, I'm not sure if it's polite to shake hands with her without actually touching flesh."

Bailey said nothing, but his fluid body drew quickly back from Barnum's hands. He reached out and took the offered cup, starting at the unfamiliar sensation of heat in his own nerve endings. Tympani was unaware of the discussion; it had taken only a second.

The sensation was explosive when it went down his throat. He gasped, and Tympani looked worried.

"Take it easy there, friend. You've got to get your nerves back in shape for something as hot as that." She took a careful sip and turned back to the keyboard. Barnum set his cup down and joined her. But it seemed like time for a recess and he couldn't get back into it. She recognized it and relaxed, taking a sandwich and eating it like she was starving.

"She *is* starving, you dope," Bailey said. "Or at least very hungry. She hasn't had anything to eat for eight hours, and she doesn't have a symb re-cycling her wastes into food and dripping it into her veins. So she gets hungry. Remember?"

"I remember. I'd forgotten." He looked at the pile of sandwiches. "I wonder what it would feel like to eat one of those?"

"Like this." Barnum's mouth was flooded with the taste of a tuna salad sandwich on whole wheat. Bailey produced this trick, like all his others, by direct stimulation of the sensorium. With no trouble at all he could produce completely new sensations simply by shorting one sector of Barnum's brain into another. If Barnum wanted to know what the taste of a tuna sandwich sounded like, Bailey could let him hear.

"All right. And I won't protest that I didn't feel the bite of it

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against my teeth, because I know you can produce that, too. And all the sensations of chewing and swallowing it, and much more besides. Still,'' and his thoughts took on a tone that Bailey wasn't sure he liked,'' I wonder if it would be the polite thing to eat one of them?''

''What's all this politeness all of a sudden?'' Bailey exploded. ''Eat it if you like, but I'll never know why. Be a carnivorous animal and see if I care.''

''Temper, temper,'' Barnum chided, with tenderness in his voice. ''Settle down, chum. I'm not going anywhere without you. But we have to get along with these people. I'm just trying to be diplomatic.''

''Eat it, then,'' Bailey sighed. ''You'll ruin my ecology schedules for months—what'll I do with all that extra protein?—but why should you care about that?''

Barnum laughed silently. He knew that Bailey could do anything he liked with it: ingest it, refine it, burn it, or simply contain it and expel it at the first opportunity. He reached for a sandwich and felt the thick substance of Bailey's skin draw back from his face as he raised it to his mouth.

He had expected a brighter light, but he shouldn't have. He was using his own retinas to see with for the first time in years, but it was no different from the cortex-induced pictures Bailey had shown him all that time.

''You have a nice face,'' Tympani said, around a mouthful of sandwich. ''I thought you would have. You painted a very nice picture of yourself.''

''I did?'' Barnum asked, intrigued. ''What do you mean?''

''Your music. It reflects you. Oh, I don't see everything in your eyes that I saw in the music, but I never do. The rest of it is Bailey, your friend. And I can't read his expression.''

''No, I guess you couldn't. But can you tell anything about him?''

She thought about it, then turned to the keyboard. She picked out a theme they had worried out a few hours before, played it a little faster and with subtle alterations in the tonality. It was a happy fragment, with a hint of something just out of reach.

''That's Bailey. He's worried about something. If experience is any guide, it's being here at Pearly Gates. Symbs don't like to come here, or anywhere there's gravity. It makes them feel not needed.''

''Hear that?'' he asked his silent partner.

''Umm.''

''And that's so silly,'' she went on. ''I don't know about it firsthand, obviously, but I've met and talked to a lot of Pairs. As far as I can see, the bond between a human and a symb is . . . well, it makes a mother cat dying to defend her kittens seem like a case of casual affection. I guess you know that bet-

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ter than I could ever say, though."

"You stated it well," he said.

Bailey made a grudging sign of approval, a mental sheepish grin. "She's out-pointed me, meat-eater. I'll shut up and let you two talk without me intruding my baseless insecurities."

"You relaxed him," Barnum told her, happily. "You've even got him making jokes about himself. That's no small accomplishment, because he takes himself pretty seriously."

"That's not fair, I can't defend myself."

"I thought you were going to be quiet?"

* * *

The work proceeded smoothly, though running longer than Bailey would have liked. After three days of transcribing, the music was beginning to take shape. A time came when Tympani could a press a button and have the machine play it back, much more than the skeletal outline they had evolved on the first day but still needing finishing touches.

"How about 'Contrapunctual Cantata'?" Tympani asked.

"What?"

"For a title. It has to have a title. I've been thinking about it, and coined that word. It fits, because the piece is very metrical in construction: tight, on-time, on the beat. Yet it has a strong counterpoint in the woodwinds."

"That's the reedy sections, right?"

"Yes. What do you think?"

"Bailey wants to know what a cantata is."

Tympani shrugged her shoulders, but looked guilty. "To tell you the truth, I stuck that in for alliteration. Maybe as a selling point. Actually, a cantata is sung, and you don't have anything like voices in this. You sure you couldn't work some in?"

Barnum considered it. "No."

"It's your decision, of course." She seemed about to say something else but decided against it.

"Look, I don't care too much about the title," Barnum said. "Will it help you to sell it, naming it that?"

"Might."

"Then do as you please."

"Thanks. I've got Rag working on some preliminary publicity. We both think this has possibilities. He liked the title, and he's pretty good at knowing what will sell. He likes the piece, too."

"How much longer before we'll have it ready?"

"Not too long. Two more days. Are you getting tired of it?"

"A little. I'd like to get back to the Ring. So would Bailey."

She frowned at him, pouting her lower lip. "That means I won't be seeing you for ten years. This sure can be a slow business. It takes forever to develop new talent."

"Why are you in it?"

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She thought about it. "I guess because music is what I like, and Janus is where the most innovative music in the system is born and bred. No one else can compete with your Ringers."

He was about to ask her why she didn't pair up and see what it was like, first-hand. But something held him back; some unspoken taboo she had set up, or perhaps it was him. Truthfully, he could no longer understand why *everyone* didn't pair with a symb. It seemed the only sane way to live. But he knew that many found the idea unattractive; even repugnant.

After the fourth recording session Tympani relaxed by playing the synthesizer for the Pair. They had known she was good, and their opinion was confirmed by the artistry she displayed at the keyboard.

Tympani had made a study of musical history. She could play Bach or Beethoven as easily as the works of the modern composers like Barnum. She performed Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, first movement. With her two hands and two peds she had no trouble at all in making an exact reproduction of a full symphony orchestra. But she didn't limit herself to that. The music would segue imperceptibly from the traditional strings into the concrete sounds that only an electronic instrument could produce.

She followed it with something by Ravel that Barnum had never heard, then an early composition by Riker. After that, she amused him with some Joplin rags and a march by John Philip Sousa. She allowed herself no license on these, playing them with the exact instrumentation indicated by the composer.

Then she moved directly into another march. This one was incredibly lively, full of chromatic runs that soared and swooped. She played it with a precision in the bass parts that the old musicians could never have achieved. Barnum was reminded of old films seen as a child, films full of snarling lions in cages and elephants bedecked with feathers.

"What was that?" he asked when she was through.

"Funny you should ask, Mr. Barnum. That was an old circus march called 'Thunder and Blazes.' Or some call it 'Entry of the Gladiators.' There's some confusion among the scholars. Some say it had a third title, 'Barnum and Bailey's Favorite,' but the majority think that was another one. If it was, it's lost, and too bad. But everyone is sure that Barnum and Bailey liked this one, too. What do you think of it?"

"I like it. Would you play it again?"

She did, and a third time later, because Bailey wanted to be sure it was safe in Barnum's memory where they could replay it later.

Tympani turned the machine off and rested her elbows on the keyboard.

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"When you go back out," she said, "Why don't you give some thought to working in a synapticon part for your next work?"

"What's a synapticon?"

She stared at him, not believing what she had heard. Then her expression changed to one of delight.

"You really don't know? Then you have something to learn." And she bounced over to her desk, grabbed something with her peds, and hopped back to the synthesizer. It was a small black box with a strap and a wire with an input jack at one end. She turned her back to him and parted her hair at the base of her skull.

"Will you plug me in?" she asked.

Barnum saw the tiny gold socket buried in her hair, the kind that enabled one to interface directly with a computer. He inserted the plug into it and she strapped the box around her neck. It was severely funtional, and had an improvised, breadboarded look about it, scarred with tool marks and chipped paint. It gave the impression of having been tinkered with almost daily.

"It's still in the development process," she said. "Myers—he's the guy who invented it—has been playing with it, adding things. When we get it right we'll market it as a necklace. The circuitry can be compacted quite a bit. The first one had a wire that connected it to the speaker, which hampered my style considerably. But this one has a transmitter. You'll see what I mean. Come on, there isn't room in here."

She led the way back to the outer office and turned on a big speaker against the wall.

What it does," she said, standing in the middle of the room with her hands at her sides, "is translate body motion into music. It measures the tensions in the body nerve network, amplifies them, and . . .well, I'll show you what I mean. This position is null; no sound is produced." She was standing straight, but relaxed, peds together, hands at her sides, head slightly lowered.

She brought her arm up in front of her, reaching with her hand, and the speaker behind her made a swooping sound up the scale, breaking into a chord as her fingers closed on the invisible tone in the air. She bent her knee forward and a soft bass note crept in, strengthening as she tensed the muscles in her thighs.

She added more harmonics with her other hand, then abruptly cocked her body to one side, exploding the sound into a cascade of chords. Barnum sat up straight, the hairs on his arms and spine sitting up with him.

Tympani couldn't see him. She was lost in a world that existed slightly out of phase with the real one, a world where dance was music and her body was the instrument. Her eyeblinks became

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stacatto punctuating phrases and her breathing provided a solid rhythmic base for the nets of sound her arms and legs and fingers were weaving.

The beauty of it to Barnum and Bailey was the perfect fitting together of movement to sound. He had thought it would be just a novelty: sweating to twist her body into shapes that were awkward and unnatural to reach the notes she was after. But it wasn't like that. Each element shaped the other. Both the music and the dance were improvised as she went along and were subordinate to no rules but her own internal ones.

When she finally came to rest, balancing on the tips of her peds and letting the sound die away to nothingness, Barnum was almost numb. And he was surprised to hear the sound of hands clapping. He realized it was his own hands, but he wasn't clapping them. It was Bailey. Bailey had *never* taken over motor control.

* * *

They had to have all the details. Bailey was overwhelmed by the new art form and grew so impatient with relaying questions through Barnum that he almost asked to take over Barnum's vocal cords for a while.

Tympani was surprised at the degree of enthusiasm. She was a strong proponent of the synapticon but had not met much success in her efforts to popularize it. It had its limitations, and was viewed as an interesting but passing fad.

"What limitations?" Bailey asked, and Barnum vocalized.

"Basically, it needs free-fall performance to be fully effective. There are residual tones that can't be eliminated when you're standing up in gravity, even on Janus. And I can't stay in the air long enough here. You evidently didn't notice it, but I was unable to introduce many variations under those conditions."

Barnum saw something at once. "Then I should have one installed. That way I can play it as I move through the Ring."

Tympani brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. She was covered in sweat from her performance, and her face was flushed. Barnum almost didn't hear her reply, he was so intent on the harmony of motion in that simple movement. And the synapticon was turned off.

"Maybe you should. But I'd wait if I were you." Barnum was about to ask why but she went on quickly. "It isn't an exact instrument yet, but we're working on it, refining it every day. Part of the problems, you see, is that it takes special training to operate it so it produces more than white noise. I wasn't strictly truthful with you when I told you how it works."

"How so?"

"Well, I said it measures tensions in nerves and translates it. Where are most of the nerves in the body?"

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Barnum saw it then. "In the brain."

"Right. So mood is even more important in this than in most music. Have you ever worked with an alpha-wave device? By listening to a tone you can control certain functions of your brain. It takes practice. The brain provides the reservoir of tone for the synapticon, modulates the whole composition. If you aren't in control of it, it comes out as noise."

"How long have you been working with it?"

"About three years."

* * *

While Barnum and Bailey were working with her, Tympani had to adjust her day and night cycles to fit with his biological processes. The Pair spent the periods of sunlight stretched out in Janus' municipal kitchen.

The kitchen was a free service provided by the community, one that was well worth the cost, since without it paired humans would find it impossible to remain on Janus for more than a few days. It was a bulldozed plain, three kilometers square, marked off in a grid with sections one hundred meters on an edge. Barnum didn't care for it—none of the Pairs liked it much—but it was the best they could do in a gravity field.

No closed ecology is truly closed. The same heat cannot be re-used endlessly as raw materials can. Heat must be added, energy must be pumped in somewhere along the line to enable the plant component of the cycle to synthesize the carbohydrates needed by the animal component. Bailey could use some of the low-level heat generated when Barnum's body broke down these molecules, but that process would soon lead to ecological bankruptcy.

The symb solution was photosynthesis, like any other plant, though the chemicals Bailey employed for it bore only a vague resemblance to chlorophyl. Photosynthesis requires large amounts of plant surface, much more than is available on an area the size of a human. And the intensity of sunlight at Saturn's orbit was only one hundredth what it was at Earth.

Barnum walked carefully, along one of the white lines of the grid. To his left and right, humans were reclining in the centers of the large squares. They were enclosed in only the thinnest coating of symb; the rest of the symb's mass was spread in a sheet of living film, almost invisible except as a sheen on the flat ground. In space, this sunflower was formed by spinning slowly and letting centrigugal force form the large parabolic organ. Here it lay inert on the ground, pulled out by mechanical devices at the corners of the square. Symbs did not have the musculature to do it themselves.

No part of their stay on Janus made them yearn for the Rings as

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much as the kitchen. Barnum reclined in the middle of an empty square and let the mechanical claws fit themselves to Bailey's outer tegument. They began to pull, slowly, and Bailey was stretched.

In the Ring they were never more than ten kilometers from the Upper Half. They could drift up there and deploy the sunflower, dream away a few hours, then use the light pressure to push them back into the shaded parts of the Ring. It was nice; it was not exactly sleep, not exactly anything in human experience. It was plant consciousness, a dreamless, simple awareness of the universe, unemcumbered with thought processes.

Barnum grumbled now as the sunflower was spread on the ground around them. Though the energy-intake phase of their existence was *not* sleep, several days of trying to accomplish it in a gravity well left Barnum with symptoms very like lack of sleep. They were both getting irritable. They were eager to return to weightlessness.

He felt the pleasant lethargy creep over him. Beneath him, Bailey was extending powerful rootlets into the naked rock, using acid compounds to eat into it and obtain the small amounts of replacement mass the Pair needed.

"So when are we going?" Bailey asked, quietly.

"Any day, now. Any day." Barnum was drowsy. He could feel the sun starting to heat the fluid in Bailey's sunflower. He was like a daisy nodding lazily in a green pasture.

"I guess I don't need to point it out, but the trascription is complete. There's no need for us to stay."

"I know."

* * *

That night Tympani danced again. She made it slow, with none of the flying leaps and swelling crescendos of the first time. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, a theme crept in. It was changed, rearranged; it was a run here and a phrase there. It never quite became melodic, as it was on the tape, but that was only right. It had been scored for strings, brass, and many other instruments but they hadn't written in a tympani part. She had to transpose for her instrument. It was still contrapunctual.

When she was done she told them of her most successful concert, the one that had almost captured the public fancy. It had been a duet; she and her partner playing the same synapticon while they made love.

The first and second movements had been well-received.

"Then we reached the finale," she remembered, wryly, "and we suddenly lost sight of the harmonies and it sounded like, well, one reviewer mentioned 'the death agonies a hyena.' I'm afraid we didn't hear it."

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"Who was it? Ragtime?"

She laughed. "Him? No, he doesn't know anything about music. He makes love all right, but he couldn't do it in 3/4 time. It was Myers, the guy who invented the synapticon. But he's more of an engineer than a musician. I haven't really found a good partner for that, and anyway, I wouldn't do it in public again. Those reviews hurt."

"But I get the idea you feel the ideal conditions for making music with it would be a duet, in free-fall, while making love."

She snorted. "Did I say that?" She was quiet for a long time.

"Maybe it is," she finally conceded. She sighed. "The nature of the instrument is such that the most powerful music is made when the body is most in tune with its surroundings, and I can't think of a better time than when I'm approaching an orgasm."

"Why didn't it work, then?"

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, but Myers blew it. He got excited, which is the whole point, of course, but he couldn't control it. There I was, tuned like a Stradivarius, feeling heavenly harps playing inside me, and he starts blasting out a jungle rhythm on a kazoo. I'm not going through that again. I'll stick to the traditional ballet like I did tonight."

"Tympani," Barnum blurted, "I could make love in 3/4 time."

She got up and paced around the room, looking at him from time to time. He couldn't see through her eyes, but felt uncomfortably aware that she saw a grotesque green blob with a human face set high up in a mass of putty. He felt a twinge of resentment for Bailey's exterior. Why couldn't she see *him*? He was in there, buried alive. For the first time he felt almost imprisoned. Bailey cringed away from the feeling.

"Is that an invitation?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But you don't have a synapticon."

"Me and Bailey talked it over. He thinks he can function as one. After all, he does much the same thing every second of our lives. He's very adept at rearranging nerve impulses, both in my brain and my body. He more or less lives in my nervous system."

She was momentarily speechless.

"You say you can make music . . . and hear it, without an instrument at all? Bailey does this for you?"

"Sure. We just hadn't thought of routing body movements through the auditory part of the brain. That's what you're doing."

She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. She seemed undecided about what to do.

"Tympani, why don't you pair up and go out into the Ring? Wait a minute, hear us out. You told me that my music was great and you think it might even sell. How did I

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do that? Do you ever think about it?''

''I think about it a lot,'' she muttered, looking away from him.

''When I came here I didn't even know the names of the notes that were in my head. I was ignorant. I still don't know much. But I write music. And you, you know more about music than anyone I ever met; you love it, you play it with beauty and skill. But what do you create?''

''I've written things,'' she said, defensively. ''Oh, all right. They weren't any good. I don't seem to have the talent in that direction.''

''But I'm proof that you don't need it. I didn't write that music; neither did Bailey. We watched it and listened to it, happening all around us. You can't imagine what it's like out there. It's all the music you ever heard.''

* * *

At first consideration it seemed logical to many that the best art in the system should issue from the Rings of Saturn. Not until humanity reaches Beta Lyrae or farther will a more beautiful place to live be found. Surely an artist could draw endless inspiration from the sights to be seen in the Ring. But artists are rare. How could the Rings produce art in every human who lived there?

The artistic life of the solar system had been dominated by Ringers for over a century. If it was the result of the heroic scale of the Rings and their superb beauty, one might expect the art produced to be mainly heroic in nature, and beautiful in tone and execution. Such had never been the case. The paintings, poetry, writing, and music of the Ringers covered the entire range of human experience and then went a step beyond.

A man or a woman would arrive at Janus for any of a variety of reasons, determined to abandon his or her former life and pair with a symb. About a dozen of them departed like that each day, not to be heard of for up to a decade. These people were a reasonable cross-section of the race, ranging from the capable to the helpless, some of them kind and others cruel. There were geniuses among them, and idiots. They were precisely as young, old, sympathetic, callous, talented, useless, vulnerable and fallible as any random sample of humanity must be. Few of them had any training or inclination in the fields of painting or music or writing.

Some of them died. The Rings, after all, were hazardous. These people had no way of learning how to survive out there except by trying and succeeding. But most came back. And they came back with pictures and songs and stories.

Agentry was the only industry on Janus. It took a special kind of agent, because few Ringers could walk into an office and present a

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finished work of any kind. A literary agent had the easiest job. But a tinpanalleycat had to be ready to teach some rudiments of music to the composer who knew nothing about notation.

The rewards were high. Ringer art was statistically about ten times more likely to sell than art from anywhere else in the system. Better yet, the agent took nearly all the profits instead of a commission, and the artists had never pressured for more. Ringers had little use for money. Often, an agent could retire on the proceeds of one successful sale.

But the fundamental question of why Ringers produced art was unanswered.

Barnum didn't know. He had some ideas, partially confirmed by Bailey. It was tied up in the blending of the human and symb mind. A Ringer was more than a human, and yet still human. When combined with a Symb something else was created. It was not under their control. The best Barnum had been able to express it to himself was by saying that this meeting of two different kinds of mind set up a tension at the junction. It was like the addition of amplitudes when two waves meet head-on. That tension was mental, and fleshed itself out by clothing itself in the symbols that were lying around for the taking in the mind of the human. It had to be the human symbols because the intellectual life of a symb starts at the moment it comes in contact with a human brain. The symb has no brain of its own and has to make do with using the human brain on a time-sharing basis.

* * *

They reached Tympani's apartment and she held the door for them. Inside, she dialed all the furniture into the floor, leaving a large, bare room with white walls.

"What do I do?" she asked in a small voice. He reached out and took her hand, which melted into the substance of Bailey.

"Give me your other hand." She did so, and watched stoically as the green stuff crept up her hands and arms. "Don't look at it," Barnum advised, and she obeyed.

He felt air next to his skin as Bailey began manufacturing an atmosphere inside himself and inflating like a balloon. The green sphere got larger, hiding Barnum completely and gradually absorbing Tympani. In five minutes the featureless green ball filled the room.

"I'd never seen that," she said, as they stood holding hands.

"Usually we do it only in space."

"What comes next?"

"Just hold still." She saw him glance over her shoulder, and started to turn. She thought better of it and tensed, knowing what was coming.

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A slim tendril had grown out of the inner surface of the symb and groped its way toward the computer terminal at the back of her head. She cringed as it touched her, then relaxed as it wormed its way in.

"How's the contact?" Barnum asked Bailey

"Just a minute . . . I'm still feeling it out." The symb had oozed through the microscopic entry points at the rear of the terminal and was following the network of filaments that extended through her cerebrum. Reaching the end of one, Bailey would quest further, searching for the loci he knew so well in Barnum.

"They're slightly different," he told Barnum. "I'll have to do a little testing to be sure I'm at the right spots."

Tympani jumped, then looked down in horror as her arms and legs did a dance without her volition.

"Tell him to stop that!" she shrieked, then gasped as Bailey ran through a rapid series of memory-sensory loci; in almost instantaneous succession she experienced the smell of an orange blossom, the void of the womb, an embarrassing incident as a child, her first free-fall. She tasted a meal eaten fifteen years ago. It was like spinning a radio dial through the frequencies, getting fragments of a thousand unrelated songs, and yet able to hear each of them in its entirety. It lasted less than a second and left her weak. But the weakness was illusory, too, and she recovered and found herself in Barnum's arms.

"Make him stop it," she demanded, struggling away from him.

"It's over," he said.

"Well, almost," Bailey said. The rest of the process was conducted beneath her conscious level. "I'm in," he told Barnum. "I can't guarantee how well this will work. I wasn't built for this sort of thing, you know. I need a larger entry point than that terminal, more like the one I sank into the top of your head."

"Is there any danger to her?

"Nope, but there's a chance I'll get overloaded and have to halt the whole thing. There's going to be a lot of traffic over that little tendril and I can't be sure it'll handle the load."

"We'll just have to do our best."

"They faced each other. Tympani was tense and stony-eyed.

"What's next?" she asked again, planting her feet on the thin but springy and warm surface of Bailey.

"I was hoping you'd do the opening bars. Give me a lead to follow. You've done this once, even if it didn't work."

"All right. Take my hands . . ."

* * *

Barnum had no idea how the composition would start. She chose a very subdued tempo. It was not a dirge; in fact, in the beginning it had no tempo at all. It was a free-

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form-tone poem. She moved with a glacial slowness that had none of the loose sexuality he had expected. Barnum watched, and heard a deep undertone develop and knew it as the awakening awareness in his own mind. It was his first response.

Gradually, as she began to move in his direction, he essayed some movement. His music added itself to hers but it remained seperate and did not harmonize. They were sitting in different rooms, hearing each other through the walls.

She reached down and touched his leg with her fingertips. She drew her hand slowly along him and the sound was like fingernails rasping on a blackboard. It clashed, it grated, it tore at his nerves. It left him shaken, but he continued with the dance.

Again she touched him, and the theme repeated itself. A third time, with the same results. He relaxed into it, understood it as a part of their music, harsh as it was. It was her tension.

He knelt in front of her and put his hands to her waist. She turned, slowly, making a sound like a rusty metal plate rolling along a concrete floor. She kept spinning and the tone began to modulate and acquire a rhythm. It throbbed, syncopated, as a function of their heartbeats. Gradually the tones began to soften and blend. Tympani's skin was glistening with sweat as she turned faster. Then, at a signal he never consciously received, Barnum lifted her in the air and the sounds cascaded around them as they embraced. She kicked her legs joyously and it combined with the thunderous bass protest of his straining leg muscles to produce an airborne series of chromatics. It reached a crescendo that was impossible to sustain, then tapered off as her feet touched the floor and they collapsed into each other. The sounds muttered to themselves, unresolved, as they cradled each other and caught their breath.

"Now we're in tune, at least," Tympani whispered, and the symbsynapticon picked up the nerve impulses in her mouth and ears and tongue as she said it and heard it, and mixed it with the impulses from Barnum's ears. The result was a vanishing series of arpeggios constructed around each word that echoed around them for minutes. She laughed when she heard it, and that was music even without the dressings.

The music had never stopped. It still inhabited the space around them, gathering itself into dark pools around their feet and pulsing in a diminishing allegretto with their hissing breath.

"It's gotten dark," she whispered, afraid to brave the intensity of sound if she were to speak aloud. Her words wove around Barnum's head as he lifted his eyes to look around them. "There are things moving around out there," she said. The tempo increased slightly as her

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heart caught on the dark-on-dark outlines she sensed.

"The sounds are taking shape," Barnum said. "Don't be afraid of them. It's in your mind."

"I'm not sure I want to see that deeply into my mind."

* * *

As the second movement started, stars began to appear over their heads. Tympani lay supine on a surface that was beginning to yield beneath her, like sand or some thick liquid. She accepted it. She let it conform to her shoulderblades as Barnum coaxed music from her body with his hands. He found handfuls of pure, bell-like tones, unencumbered with timbre or resonance; existing by themselves. Putting his lips to her, he sucked out a mouthful of chords which he blew out one by one, where they clustered like bees around his nonsense words, ringing change after change on the harmonies in his voice.

She stretched her arms over her head and bared her teeth, grabbing at the sand that was now as real to her touch as her own body was. Here was the sexuality Barnum had sought. Brash and libidinous as a goddess in the Hindu pantheon, her body shouted like a dixieland clarinet and the sounds caught on the waving tree limbs overhead and thrashed about like tattered sheets. Laughing, she held her hands before her face and watched as sparks of blue and white fire arced across her fingertips. The sparks leaped out to Barnum and he glowed where they touched him.

The universe they were visiting was an extraordinarily cooperative one. When the sparks jumped from Tympani's hands into the dark, cloud-streaked sky, bolts of lightning came skittering back at her. They were awesome, but not fearsome. Tympani knew them to be productions of Bailey's mind. But she liked them. When the tornados formed above her and writhed in a dance around her head, she liked that, too.

The gathering storm increased as the tempo of their music increased, in perfect step. Gradually, Tympani lost track of what was happening. The fire in her body was transformed into madness: a piano rolling down a hillside or a harp being used as a trampoline. There was the drunken looseness of a slide trombone played at the botton of a well. She ran her tongue over his cheek and it was the sound of beads of oil falling on a snare drum. Barnum sought entrance to the concert hall, sounding like a head-on collision of harpsichords.

Then someone pulled the plug on the turntable motor and the tape was left to thread its way through the heads at a slowly diminishing speed as they rested. The music gabbled insistently at them, reminding them that this could only be a brief intermission, that they were in the

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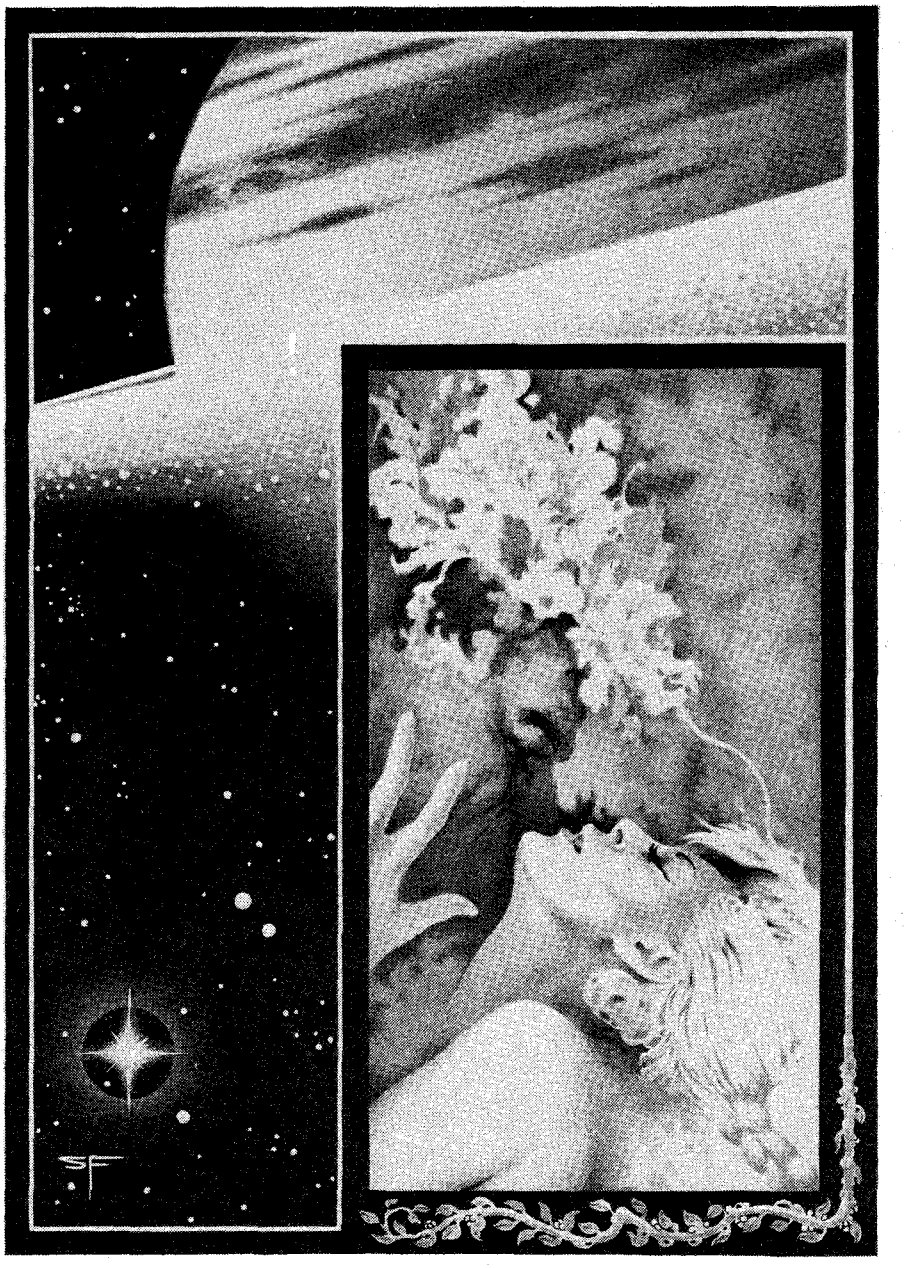

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command of forces beyond themselves. They accepted it, Tympani sitting lightly in Barnum's lap, facing him, and allowing herself to be cradled in his arms.

"Why the pause?" Tympani asked, and was delighted to see her words escape her mouth not in sound, but in print. She touched the small letters as they fluttered to the ground.

"Bailey requested it," Barnum said, also in print. "His circuits are overloading." His words orbited twice around his head, then vanished.

"And why the skywriting?"

"So as not to foul the music with more words."

She nodded, and rested her head on his shoulder again.

Barnum was happy. He gently stroked her back, producing a warm, fuzzy rumble. He shaped the contours of the sound with his fingertips. Living in the Ring, he was used to the feeling of triumphing over something infinitely vast. With the aid of Bailey he could scale down the mighty Ring until it was within the scope of a human mind. But nothing he had ever experienced rivalled the sense of power he felt in touching Tympani and getting—music.

A breeze was starting to eddy around them. It rippled the leaves of the tree that arched over them. The lovers had stayed planted on the ground during the height of the storm; now the breeze lifted them into the air and wafted them into the gray clouds.

Tympani had not noticed it. When she opened her eyes all she knew was that they were back in limbo again, alone with the music. And the music was beginning to build.

The last movement was both more harmonious and less varied. They were finally in tune, acknowledging the baton of the same conductor. The piece they were extemporizing was jubilant. It was noisy and broad, and gave signs of becoming Wagnerian. But somewhere the Gods were laughing.

Tympani flowed with it, letting it become her. Barnum was sketching out the melody line while she was content to supply the occassional appogiatura, the haunting nuance that prevented it from becoming ponderous.

The clouds began to withdraw, slowly revealing the new illusion that Baily had moved them to. It was hazy. But it was vast. Tympani opened her eyes and saw

— the view from the Upper Half, only a few kilometers above the plane of the Ring. Below her was an infinite golden surface and above her were stars. Her eyes were drawn to the plane, down there. . .it was thin. Insubstantial. One could see right through it. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun (and introducing a forlorn minor theme into the music) she peered into the whirling marvel they

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had taken her out here to see and her ears were filled with the shrieks of her unspoken fear as Bailey picked it up. There were stars down there, all around her, and moving toward her, and she was moving through them, and they were beginning to revolve, and . . .

. . . the inner surface of Bailey. Above her unseeing eyes, a slim green tendril, severed, was writhing back into the wall. It disappeared.

* * *

"Burnt out."

"Are you all right?" Barnum asked him.

"I'm all right. Burnt out. You felt it. I warned you the connection might not handle the traffic."

Barnum consoled him. "We never expected that intensity." He shook his head, trying to clear the memory of that awful moment. He had his fears, but evidently no phobias. Nothing had ever gripped him like the Rings gripped Tympani.

He gratefully felt Bailey slip in and ease the pain back into a corner of his mind where he needn't look at it. Plenty of time for that later, on the long, silent orbits they would soon be following . . .

Tympani was sitting up, puzzled, but beginning to smile. Barnum wished Bailey could give him a report on her mental condition, but the connection was broken. Shock? He'd forgotten the symptoms.

"I'll have to find out for myself," he told Bailey.

"She looks all right to me," Bailey said. "I was calming her as the contact was breaking. She might not remember much."

She didn't. Or, mercifully, she remembered the happiness but had only a vague impression of the fear at the end. She didn't want to look at it, which was just as well. There was no need for her to be tantalized or taunted by something she could never have.

They made love there inside Bailey. It was quiet and deep, and lasted a long time. What lingering hurts there were found healing in that gentle silence, punctuated only by the music of their breathing.

Then Bailey slowly retracted around Barnum, contracting their universe down to man-size and forever excluding Tympani.

It was an awkward time for them. Barnum and Bailey were due at the catapult in an hour. All three knew that Tympani could never follow them, but they didn't speak of it. They promised to remain friends, and knew it was empty.

Tympani had a financial statement which she handed to Barnum.

"Two thousand, minus nineteen ninety-five for the pills." She dropped the dozen small pellets into his other hand. They contained the trace elements the Pair could not obtain in the Ring, and constituted the only reason they ever needed to visit Janus.

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"Is that enough?" Tympani asked, anxiously.

Barnum looked at the sheet of paper. He had to think hard to recall how important money was to single humans. He had little use for it.

His bank balance would keep him in supplement pills for thousands of years if he could live that long, even if he never came back to sell another song. And he understood now why there was so little repeat business on Janus. Pairs and humans could not mix. The only common ground was art, and even there the single humans were driven by monetary pressures alien to Pairs.

"Sure, that's fine," he said, and tossed the paper aside. "It's more than I need."

Tympani was relieved.

"I *know* that of course," she said, feeling guilty. "But I always feel like an exploiter. It's not very much. Rag says this one could really take off and we could get rich. And that's all you'll ever get out of it."

Barnum knew that, and didn't care.

"It's really all we need," he repeated. "I've already been paid in the only coin I value, which was the privilege of knowing you."

They left it at that.

* * *

The countdown wasn't a long one. The operators of the cannon tended to herd the Pairs through the machine like cattle through a gate. But it was plenty of time for Barnum and Bailey, on stretched-time, to embed Tympani in amber.

"Why?" Barnum asked at one point. "Why here? Where does the fear come from?"

"I saw some things," Bailey said, thoughtfully. "I was going to probe, but then I hated myself for it. I decided to leave her private traumas alone."

The count was ticking slowly down to the firing signal, and a bass, mushy music began to play in Barnum's ears.

"Do you still love her?" Barnum asked.

"More than ever."

"So do I. It feels good, and it hurts. I suppose we'll get over it. But from now on, we'd better keep our world down to a size we can handle. What is that music, anyway?"

"A send-off," Bailey said. He accelerated them until they could hear it. "It's coming over the radio. A circus march."

Barnum had no sooner recognized it than he felt the gentle but increasing push of the cannon accelerating him up the tube. He laughed, and the two of them shot out of the bulging brass pipe of the Pearly Gates Calliope. They made a bullseye through a giant orange smoke ring, accompanied by the strains of "Thunder and Blazes." ★

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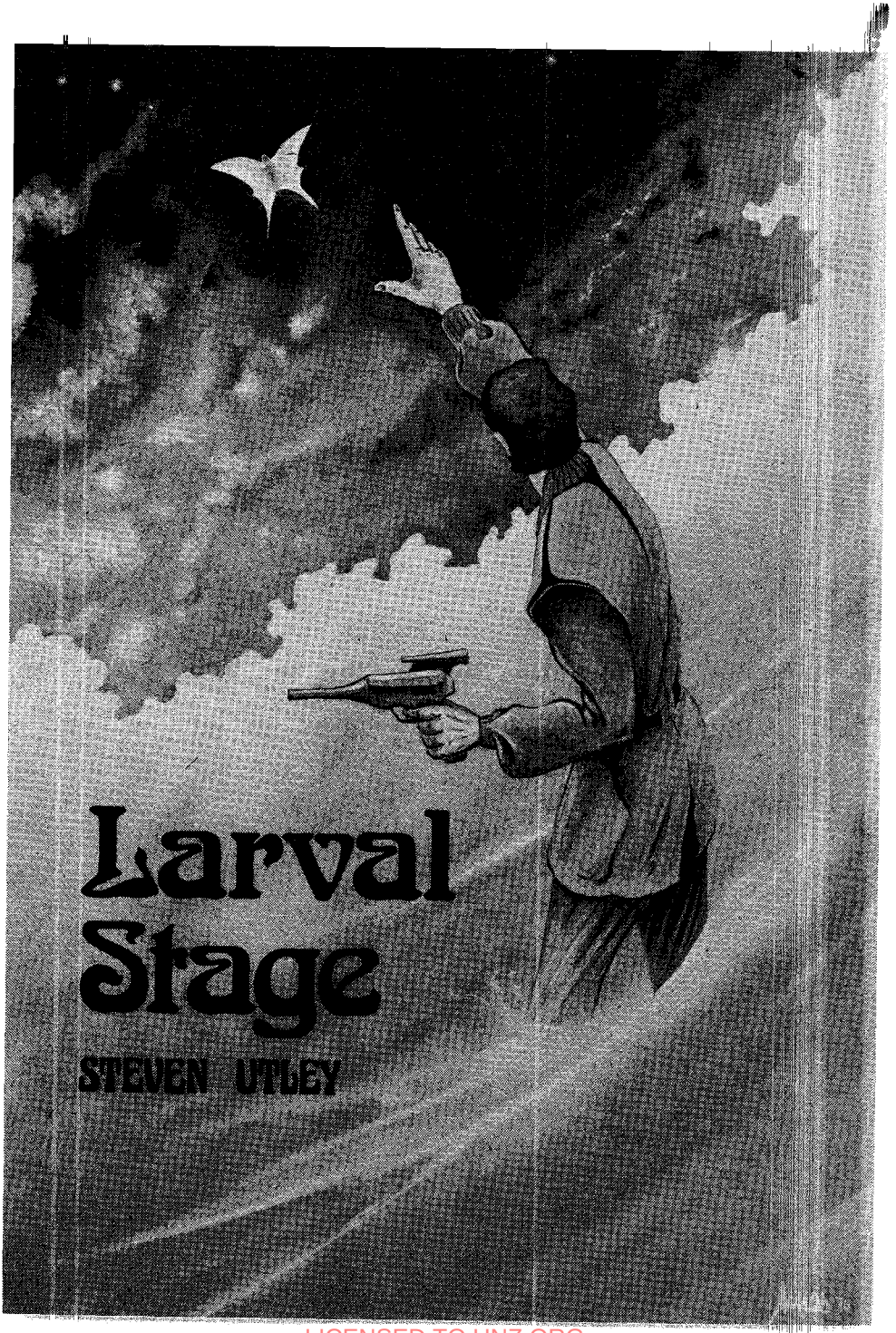

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No man is an island—and yet, and yet. . .

"AS OF TWELVE-FIFTEEN this afternoon," the bland-faced woman on the wall was saying, "when Governor Trentino officially welcomes the delegation from 61 Cygni in the name of the Terran Network, the human race will no longer be alone. The significance of this event canno—"

He blanked the wall with a word and finished loading the heavy pistol, then sighted along the large-mouthed barrel at nothing in particular.

"What time is it?" he asked, putting the weapon into the left pocket of his jacket.

"Seven minutes and forty-three seconds before five a. m.," said the wall.

He nodded. It would be getting light outside, and the crowds would soon begin to gather at the terminal. He left and hurried down to the street. He would have to show up early if he expected to get a place up front.

* * *

Lumbering across the tarmac on its tricycle landing gear, the wedge-shaped shuttlecraft could have been a sculptor's larger-than-life parody of the Cygnians. Governor James Amost Trentino smiled slightly at the thought and watched as the ship rolled into the shadow of the disembarkation ramp and lurched to a stop.

"Aren't you at all nervous about this?" Vera Marcal asked at his side.

Trentino did not look away from the window. On the tarmac, the ship began to extrude its cylindrical airlock into the waiting mouth of the ramp.

"I woke up with a premonition this morning," he said. "Today is going to go down as smoothly as cream, Vera."

Behind him, Emily Teasdale gave a soft snort of amusement. "I hate having to be the one to remind you, James, but you checked out a dud in the precog department. The fleet and the Cygnian vessel have been giving one another the eye upstairs for the past four days, the separatists are howling for yours and Chicolini's blood . . . if you had any sense, you'd be as scared as the rest of us."

Marcal shifted her attache case from hand to hand and grinned at

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the governor. "She's right, James. We're walking the tightrope over the abyss. If we don't get the Cygnians into the Network, TNC will be putting your head out to dry on an iron spike."

"You two are such a damned comfort," Trentino said with a sigh. "Be calm. Chicolini's been aboard the alien vessel ever since it dropped into orbit. He knows them, and they know him. He'll put them at their ease. The separatists are too much in the minority to cause real trouble. Be calm. This is the big moment. The one we've been waiting and working for. The moment they'll always remember us for."

"That's what George Custer told his troops in 1876," Teasdale said.

He half-turned to give her a sour look. His throat beeped softly. He pressed a fingertip against a small, hard lump under his jaw and said, in sub-vocals, *trentino here.*

major chicolini and the cygnian have left the shuttlecraft, hummed the little black button attached to Trentino's right earlobe, *and are now coming up the ramp.*

thank you. He shot a questioning look at one of the many uniformed security guards posted at intervals throughout the lobby. The woman signaled that she, too, had received the information.

"Well," Trentino said to his two aides, "bright smiles now."

They moved away from the window overlooking the tarmac and stood at attention before the sealed door of the ramp. Trentino touched his sub-dermal communicator again. *max.*

everything's fine out here on the street, governor. monitors going full blast. lots of excitement, but nothing to worry about. looks like the anti-network factions and the xenophobes are sleeping late. or watching it at home and bitching.

thanks, max.

He took his finger off his throat, and then the ramp doors slid open, and Major Joseph F. Chicolini and the Cygnian delegate stepped forth.

Trentino gasped in spite of himself.

It had been one thing to see the images the Cygnians broadcast from their starship. It was quite another thing altogether to have one of the creatures stand close, to hear the sound its chitinous feet made on the floor, to smell its dusty odor.

The Cygnian was a wedge-bodied being with a shiny blue carapace, stilt-like legs with bulbous joints, clusters of lesser appendages clutched tightly against its underside. Its face, or, rather, the droplet-like cluster of sensory organs above the horn-lipped mouth at the point of the wedge, was on a level with Trentino's chin.

Major Chicolini, a smallish man who did not look especially comfortable in his ornate dress uniform, saluted, took Trentino's hand for a second and said, "Governor Trentino, may I present the delegate from 61 Cygni?"

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Trentino and the two women bowed stiffly from the waist.

The Cygnian unfolded a delicate-looking grasping appendage, took a hemispherical object from a holster strapped above the first joint of its foreleg and held the flat surface of the instrument against its throat sac.

"We see you once again," it said in a startling bass growl, "and we rejoice. We see that you are well, and we are satisified."

"We extend a welcome in the name of the Terran Network," the governor replied, "and we congratulate you on your mastery of our language."

He smiled and darted a look at the major, touched his throat and said, *what was that part about seeing me again, chicolini?*

the cygnian mass-mind at work, bear it in mind when you're dealing with the delegate, governor. the twelve or thirteen billion adult cygnians compose a single entity with a shared consciousness. natural for it to assume we're no different.

"We have a vehicle waiting," Trentino said, "to convey us to the reception at Doucet Tower." He turned, and Major Chicolini and the alien drew abreast of him. Marcal and Teasdale fell into step behind them. As they started across the lobby, half a dozen security guards detached themselves from the walls and moved with them.

Trentino's throat beeped again. *go ahead.*

terminal remains cleared, save for your party and security personnel, from gate three to the street.

good. keep it that way. He touched his throat again. *max.*

crowd knows you're coming. excitement level's shooting up, but everyone's behaving. nobody's tried to break through the security line, god knows how they'll react when you step out, though. this terminal just wasn't laid out for maximum security maneuvers, sir.

don't i know it.

They walked on in silence disturbed only by the click of the Cygnian's feet. When they arrived at the main doors of the terminal, Trentino almost hesitated. Through the smoky dark plate glass, he could see the van and the escort vehicles, the two parallel lines of uniformed men and women holding back the crowd. He swallowed hard and abruptly realized that the palms of his hands were slick with perspiration.

Calmly now, he told himself. This is your day, J. A. The day the Cygnians first set foot upon a Terran Network world. The day you welcome 61 Cygni into the Network. Calmly now. With dignity.

He put a slight smile on his lips and stepped through the doorway, into the hazy warmth of Alpha Centauri's midday light, into a swelling tide of *ohs* and *ahs* and *here they come NOW*s. Three red, pearl-smooth telefax balloons settled lower in the air above his head and

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fixed their glittering glass eyes on him, on Major Chicolini, on the Cygnian. He glanced up for the benefit of the cameras, shot a quick, nervous look at the open mouths and widening eyes beyond the security line on his left, then, as the murmurs of the multitude deepened to a roar, forced himself to look straight ahead at the van.

There was an urgent buzzing sound from his communicator. The sound did not have time in which register upon his mind as the emergency signal before his earring hissed, *we're picking up someth—*

The governor never knew whether Max stopped speaking in midsyllable or whether he simply did not hear the rest of the sentence. One of the guards before and to the right of him lurched forward from the security line, buckled at the knees, toppled. Someone lunged through the gap in the line and pointed something in his direction, but it was only after the first shot had been fired that he recognized the thing the person was holding as a large gun.

There was a second shot, a scream, yells. Unable to move or speak, Trentino could only stare as the attacker went down under several security guards. Arms flailed. Hands clutched. There was a third shot, immediately followed by an explosion above Trentino's head. Something struck him low on the left side of the neck. He blinked, touched the spot where the blow had fallen, felt a hard, sharp object protruding from the flesh at the juncture of neck and shoulder. His hand came away wet and sticky.

The governor looked at the blood on his fingers for a moment, then, bewildered, at the telefax balloons overhead. There were only two of them now.

Unmindful of the hell breaking loose all around him, he sat down on the pavement and rubbed his fingertips together. Someone bawled his name. Consciousness fled.

* * *

The light in the room was soft and soothing. He thought of the look on Governor Trentino's face, and he tried to grin. But they had paralyzed him. The muscles around his slightly parted lips quivered ineffectually. He made a sobbing sound in the back of his throat.

. . . lonely lonely lonely I was so lonely nobody ever paid any attention never heard a word I said never looked at me before today oh oh but oh how clever how cunning how perfectly timed it was oh because now they people everybody all of those thousands who were there all of those millions who saw it they know who I am now when I walk down the street they'll recognize me now they'll say there goes that Albert Dean Crater that man who the man who who who told them they'd be sorry who told them to stop ignoring him pay attention who knew

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who knew how lonely how clever how worthy of notice who knew how to make them feel bad how to make them sorry knew how how about that Mr. Trentino Major Joseph Chicolini alien how about that you thought they'd all be looking at you but I knew I knew I knew how to make them all look! *at!* ME!

The light in the room was soft and soothing. He make a chuckling sound in the back of his throat.

* * *

"A call, sir," the wall announced, "from Ms. Teasdale."

Trentino frowned, his thick eyebrows almost meeting above the bridge of his nose, and stabbed a finger down on the HOLD tab. The wafer-thin dictation slate on the desk before him clicked. He regarded the lines of type covering the top half of the slate for a second more before answering.

"Did she say what she wants?"

"She said only that it's important, sir."

"Of course it is." Trentino looked at the slate and absently fingered the faint pink scar at the base of his neck, where the sliver of shrapnel from the exploding telefax balloon had struck him. He had not been enjoying the task of preparing a report to Terran Network Central on Earth. He would, he knew, enjoy the repercussions even less. His gaze settled upon a paragraph a quarter of the way down the slate.

. . . WERE LEAVING THE TERMINAL WHEN A MAN IDENTIFIED AS ALBERT DEAN CRATER (AC-4 M/50-1199-512) CLUBBED AC4AST SECURITY OFFICER SARAH G SIMMONS, BROKE THROUGH THE LINE AND FIRED THREE SHOTS FROM A RECOILLESS 15-MM HAND CANNON, KISHEL & DECKER MODEL 7, SERIAL # 14155. THE FIRST SHOT STRUCK THE CYGNIAN DELEGATE ON ITS CARAPACE, DUG A CENTIMETER-DEEP FURROW ACROSS ITS BACK AND RICOCHETED THROUGH A FIRST-FLOOR WINDOW OF THE AC4AST MAIN LOBBY, SPRAYING SECURITY PERSONNEL INSIDE WITH GLASS BUT INJURING NONE OF THEM. THE—

"Sir," the wall said, "Ms. Teasdale insists that you speak with her."

"Oh. Yes. Of course." Trentino shoved the slate aside, sank back into his chair and watched across the tips of steepled fingers as a rectangular section of the wall opposite his desk shimmered, dissolved and was replaced by an image of the pale face of Emily Teasdale. He forced a smile that buried the ends of his moustache in the creases bracketing his mouth and said, "Emily."

"We're still waiting for the results of this man Crater's psychecheck, Governor."

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"They're on their way down now. Chicolini's still trying to explain matters to the Cygnian?"

Teasdale grimaced and nodded.

"Is the alien still having fits?"

"No. Not really. Though I wouldn't blame it if it was. It's gotten over the shock of the incident at least to the point where it isn't so much angry as baffled."

"Have Chicolini *assure* the delegate that Crater is certifiably insane."

"Of course."

"Emily, does Chicolini think we have any chance at all of getting ourselves out of this mess intact."

Teasdale started to shake her head, then shrugged. "He's not very optimistic, Governor. Even with evidence of Crater's insanity, he thinks it's going to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make the alien understand exactly what happened at the terminal."

"But surely the Cygnian realizes that we took every possible step to ensure its safety, and that—"

"What Chicolini is faced with," Teasdale cut in, "is trying to explain irrational behavior on the part of a member of our race to an entity incapable of quite grasping the idea that the whole of *Homo sapiens* isn't totally responsible for all of its parts."

Trentino groaned softly. He saw Teasdale look off-camera, obviously listening to someone, saw her nod and accept a red-backed folder.

"The report on Crater just arrived," she said, facing the governor again. "I hope it helps."

"Keep me posted, Emily."

"Of course."

Teasdale's image shrank and vanished. Trentino touched another button on his desk. "Osborn."

"Yes, sir," came the reply.

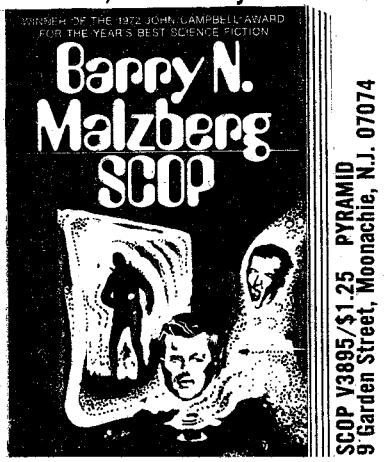
"Any change upstairs?"

"No, sir. Fleet reports that the Cygnian vessel still has its shields up and its weapons systems at the ready. No activity apart from that."

"Fine." I guess, he added to himself as he cleared the line. "Get me Duncan at the hospital."

"Yes, sir." There was a pause. "Sir, Ms. Graham is calling."

It is the 21st century, but Scop is in 1963—attending assassinations. He's warned, cajoled, pleaded . . . but he knows he's a failure. Trying to alter the future, he has merely reinforced it!



SCOP V3895/$1.25 PYRAMID
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Trentino mouthed a couple of heartfelt obscenities. "Put her on hold."

Lamont Duncan's face appeared on the wall. "Hello, Governor."

"Any word yet on Vera?"

Duncan's teeth went into his lower lip for a second. "They're still working on her. Possible internal injuries resulting from the concussion when the cannon shell struck her attache case. And her arm almost came off from the elbow down. They had her frozen down within three minutes of the shooting. She may be all right. She may be all mush inside, and they'd have to scoop her out and put in prostheses."

"God damn it." He scowled at the dictation slate. "Okay. Stay there, Lamont. Call me if. . . ."

"Of course, sir."

Trentino blanked the wall. It said, "Ms. Graham is holding, sir."

The governor repressed a snarl. He had never liked Katherine Graham, and his inability to root her out of the Network bureaucracy of Alpha Centauri IV had never ceased to rankle him. "Put her on!"

Graham looked pleased with herself when her image solidified. "Governor," she said, "we've completed the public-opinion survey analysis. An overwhelming majority of the populace feels that this man Crater's attack on the delegate from 61 Cygni is an outrage."

"How wonderful."

Graham nodded, oblivious to all sarcasm. "We've laid out a whole series of telefax releases, and, as soon as you've approved them, we can start feeding them to the public. By linking Crater to the separatists, we can effectively undermine—no, better than that, we can utterly *destroy* the credibility of the entire anti-Earth movement. After that, anybody who dares speak out against Network policy, or against the things from 61 Cygni, will run the risk of being torn to pieces by patriotic citizens."

"That's beautiful, Graham. That's what I call really taking advantage of a golden opportunity."

Graham beamed. "I knew you'd like it, sir."

"Unfortunately, it isn't the truth. Crater isn't a separatist. He's a totally apolitical, totally mad person."

"But—"

"Even if it *was* the truth," Trentino went on, "we couldn't use him to discredit the separatists."

Graham stared at him disbelievingly. "Governor, we can't throw away a chance like this! Now, while public opinion is definitely in our favor, now is the time to kill the separatist cause for *all* time! We've never had a weapon like Crator before!"

"We've never been tangled up with aliens before, either." He paused, savoring the lost look in the woman's eyes. "In case you've

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been too busy to keep abreast of things, Graham, let me explain it to you as simply as I can. What we've been trying to do for the past ten years, ever since the first expedition to 61 Cygni, is get the Cygnians into the Network. Crater's complicated matters to the tenth power. You'll complicate them infinitely more if you get the public boiled up over politics. We have to gloss over internal disunities. We have to show the Cygnians that, unfortunate incidents like this one notwithstanding, we as a race are as . . . as single-minded in our desires as they are. So discard your prospectus for the anti-separatist releases." He smiled. "We must perforce break with tradition and give out plain, unadorned truth, Graham. I know that won't be any fun for you, but it's essential."

Without waiting for her to reply, Trentino blanked the wall. Almost at once, he was informed that Major Chicolini was calling. The governor made a tired sound, dialed for a tranquilizer and waited for the drug to enter his bloodstream through the mucous membrane of mouth and throat before accepting the call.

Major Chicolini looked grim. Despite the drug, Trentino felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

"Well?" the governor demanded. "Have you. . . ?"

"It wants Crater, sir."

"It *what*?"

"The Cygnian wants Crater."

Trentino dialed for a second tranquilizer. "*Why* does it want him?"

"It won't say. Or it can't say."

Trentino ignored the tranquilizer in his hand and glared at Chicolini. "Major, I can't just hand a Network citizen, even a crazy one, over to the alien. Especially not without a reason."

"Governor, I appreciate your position. But the Cygnian insists that it have Crater."

"No. Emphatically not. Crater is our responsibility."

"Then I've just wasted ten hours," Major Chicolini snapped, "convincing the delegate that Crater is *not* our responsibility." A note of pleading entered his voice. "Sir, I don't think that the Cygnian has any intention of harming Crater. It's . . . curious."

"Curious? Curious about what?"

"It's asking to be allowed to prove to itself, to its own satisfaction, that what I've been telling it about human beings is the truth. That we are an adult, fully developed race of separate, whole-unto-ourselves beings. As far as the Cygnian knows, this is an irreconciliable dichotomy. The only experience it's had with anything remotely resembling our kind of creature is with its own larvae. Vicious, unpredictable things that don't enter the Cygnian mind-link until the pupal stage."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment.

"It's been a rotten day," Trentino finally said.

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Major Chicolini nodded. "Let it have Crater," he said. "If you do, chances are we won't be much worse off than we were when the delegate and I came up the ramp at noon."

"That's your considered opinion?"

"Yes, sir."

"You realize, Major, that we're all in bad, *bad* trouble if this—" Trentino leaned forward in his seat to tap the dictation slate "—goes off to Earth without a happy ending on it."

"Yes, sir."

The governor massaged the bridge of his nose and caught himself wishing, really wishing, that he had grown up to be anything other than a mildly efficient, mildy honest politician.

"Very well," he said. "The Cygnian gets Crater."

* * *

They'll come to see me lots of people men women everybody talking to me asking me want to know why I did it oh my God yes I can see their faces already every eye on me telefax cameras oh and microphones the questions they'll ask me why did I do it why why wanting to find out wanting to know asking me tell us Albert or tell us Mr. Crater yes I like that *Mr.* Crater tell us Mr. Crater why did you do it and I'll look into the camera telefax camera millions of people seeing me hearing me on the wall watching thinking about Albert Crater what made him do it saying yes that's Albert Crater the man on the wall there the man who did it and they'll ask me why did you do it Mr. Crater can you tell us won't you please tell us *please* Mr. Crater I did it I'll say I did it because oh God why *shouldn't* I do it what else have I ever done no no I'll tell them the reason I did it is is is. . . .

He lay upon his back, helpless, unable to move, held against a slick, slightly convex surface, in a place where the air had an odd flavor, where machinery hummed softly to itself, where wedge-bodied creatures clustered about him.

One of the creatures touched his naked thigh with a chitinous claw.

"Don't touch me, God damn it!"

The creature pressed an instrument against its throat and rumbled, "This one is severed?"

"In a manner of speaking." A human voice. A smallish man in an ornate but rather rumpled-looking uniform appeared among the aliens.

"It is not a . . . young?"

"It is aberrant. It has reached its full physical growth. It does not conform to our standard. It is cut off from the rest of its kind."

"Severed," said the alien.

The uniformed man bent over him and whispered, "Crater."

"Albert Crater. Albert *Dean* Crater. *Mr.* Albert Dean Crater." He studied the uniformed man's face for a second, trying to remember where he had seen it before. "I suppose you want to talk to me."

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"Crater, *listen* to me."

"Listen to *me*." He strained against the unyielding grip of the convexity. "No one *ever* listens to me. It's time *everybody* listened."

"Crater, do you know where you are?"

"I want to see somebody. I want everybody to hear why I did it. Where is everybody?"

"The Cygnians—"

"Cygnians fygnians pygnians." He giggled shrilly. "Wygnians."

"The Cygnians are going to probe you, Crater. Just relax. Be calm. It won't hurt you."

"Everybody hurts me. Everybody. I got back at them, though. Didn't I? Didn't I? Did you see the look on their faces?"

"Just relax," the uniformed man hissed softly. He straightened and looked at the aliens. "He's as ready as he can be. The drugs have worn off. He's fully conscious."

The man spreadeagled on the convexity closed his eyes. They aren't listening to me, he thought. They're ignoring me again. They aren't coming to talk to me. I'm tired of being lonely. I'm tired of it. That's what I. Will tell them. I'm tired. Of being. Cut. Off.

The curved surface beneath him seemed to grow soft. Alarmed, he opened his eyes and found himself settling through something warm and milky white in color. He opened his mouth to cry out, but the stuff poured into his throat, silencing him without choking him.

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Directly above his face, a fuzzy sphere of bluish light appeared. Scintillae separated from it and flickered out of existence. He shut his eyes, trying to close out the bluish light, and super-novae flared on the inner sides of his eyelids, slivers of glass sliced at his optic nerves, something long and cool and hard stabbed behind his face. He had to look. He had to look.

He saw chitinous claws operating levers. He saw consoles and examined dials marked off with angular characters and knew what they signified. He saw one of the aliens approaching along a tunnel-like corridor, and, as he approached along a tunnel-like corridor, he saw one of the aliens watching him. He saw

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the familiar green orb of Alpha Centauri IV through an observation port and knew a longing for geometric buildings gleaming in the harsh light of a strange sun. He saw the uniformed man standing between two aliens. He saw the uniformed man standing on either side of him. He saw a naked man spreadeagled on the surface of a glowing bubble. He saw the sphere of bluish light above his face.

He saw, and something within himself parted like tissue paper, and he was calmed, and he was no longer alone.

"This one," he heard the alien say, "is not severed now."

* * *

"Crater," Dr. Janice Oppenheimer said, "was a prize ineffectual. A person who'd spent the first thirty-eight years of his life feeling inadequate and ignored, accomplishing nothing, amounting to nothing. He went over the edge, finally. But whatever the Cygnians did to him, it seems to have helped. He was calm, if exhausted, when the major here returned him from the aliens' vessel."

Trentino finished his cup of stimulac and eased back into the fragrant depths of his chair. He had slept no more than thirteen of the fifty-two hours since the shooting at the terminal. He ached with fatigue. Dr. Oppenheimer and Major Chicolini sat opposite his desk, both of them looking fresh and rested. The governor regarded them enviously.

"Is Crater still certifiable?" he asked the doctor.

Dr. Oppenheimer shrugged. "It's too soon to tell. Cygnian psychotherapuetic techniques are still beyond our comprehension at this point."

Major Chicolini cleared his throat quietly and said, "The Cygnians' term for the larval stage of their own species roughly translates as *severed*. The condition of not being in communication with the adults' mass-mind. The larvae enter the pupal phase of development and emerge as *joined*. There are aberrations from time to time, when pupae emerged into adulthood but can't—or won't, perhaps—link themselves with the other grown-ups. In such cases the Cygnians . . .fix them."

Trentino cocked an eyebrow at Dr. Oppenheimer. "And Crater has been fixed, too?"

"Crater has been *something*ed, Governor. We don't know what or how. We ran three psyche-checks on him in as many hours. He was calm, happy, at worst, a little confused to find himself back on the ground again. At best, completely cured of his psychosis."

"Excuse me, sir," said the wall. "Dr. Oppenheimer has a call from Dr. Gill."

"There's a private line in the library," Trentino said.

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"Thank you." Dr. Oppenheimer got to her feet and left the governor's office.

Major Chicolini examined his immaculately kept nails for a moment. "Governor, you look as though you could stand to log about twenty hours' sleep time."

Trentino gave him a tired smile. "I intend to do just that as soon as I have the whole grisly mess neatly tied up. I'm still hoping to have a completely happy ending to tack onto my report to TNC."

"At least things don't look as bad now as they did two days ago. We're short a telefax balloon and a plate-glass window, but nobody got killed. Vera's all right, you and the Cygnian delegate and that security guard Crater conked are all right . . . plus, Crater himself may have finally become, uh, joined to the rest of the human race. Most important, the Cygnians are still on good terms with us." Major Chicolini grinned. "All things considered, I think we've just about broken even, sir."

"Well, I just hope I never have another two days like the past two."

Dr. Oppenheimer re-entered the room. She was frowning.

"What's wrong?" said Trentino.

"Crater. Dr. Gill says he's succumbing to depression all of a sudden. I'd better go have a look."

Trentino swore irritably. "Call me as soon as you know what's going on."

"Certainly." She left.

"Well," Major Chicolini said with a long sigh.

The governor nodded glumly. "Looks like our butterfly is reverting to the larval stage, doesn't it?"

* * *

The light in the room was soft and soothing. Dr. Gill had thought it best to paralyze him again. He lay upon his bed and stared up at the featureless white ceiling through a film of tears, and he tried to call out whenever someone entered the room to check on him.

Why don't you listen to me?

Why won't you talk to me?

What's wrong with you?

Oh, God, God, don't let me be lonely again! I want them to be my friends. I want them to know me. I want them to love me. I want to be their friend.

Why don't they open up? What's wrong with them? Why don't they answer me God don't let them cut me off I want to be their friend but they're shutting me out resisting me and I'm not strong enough to break through can't they understand aren't they able to hear me I keep trying to reach them but I slide off I can't get in why don't they HEAR ME?

Deep in his throat, the butterfly made a strangled, angry noise, and one of the caterpillars rushed into the room to investigate. ★

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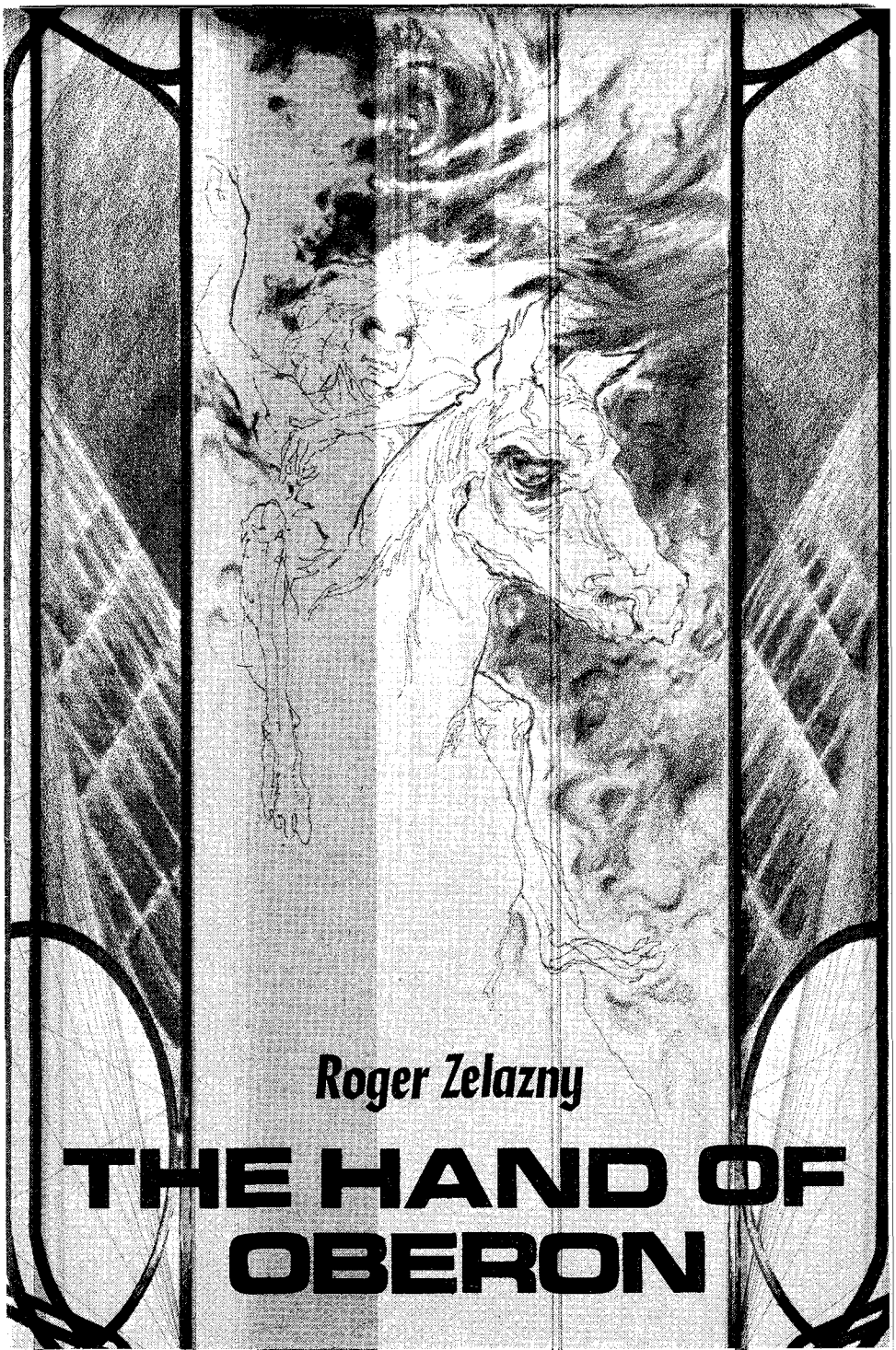

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Part II of II

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Random, Ganelon and I had been conducted on a strange journey. Led by the Unicorn of Amber, we had passed through peculiar shadows, arriving at last on an oval shelf of stone at a place where the sea and the sky seemed to come together—a place chopped out of a mountain much like Kolvir, creating a locale similar to Amber, sans *palace,* sans *city. Inscribed upon the shelf was the Pattern of Amber, leading me to the conclusion that this had to be the real basis of the world as I knew it, my own home but its nearest shadow.*

We were distracted by the emergence of a purple griffin from a nearby cave. It frightened Random's horse, Iago. Iago fled onto the Pattern, where he was destroyed without trace by a vortex of forces which suddenly occurred overhead. The griffin tried to protect us the while, so we decided he couldn't be all bad—some sort of watch-thing, most likely.

This Pattern was strangely marred, by a long black smear extending in a direction corresponding to our own south, the route of the black road. In fact, the phenomena seemed related. Damage to the Pattern could possibly have created such an entrance to the realm as the road represented.

Near to the center of the Pattern, at the beginning of the smear, we noticed a foreign object, which Ganelon recovered. It was a Trump—which neither Random nor I recognized—pierced by a dagger. Ganelon then came up with the odd hypothesis that the blood of Amber might act as a solvent on the Pattern. I persuaded Random to test the notion and it proved correct. We then realized what this must mean with respect to the large, blotted section: a human sacrifice. And Random, who was one jump ahead of me, saw the resemblance between himself and the figure on the pierced Trump, concluding that his illegitimate son Martin had been the subject of the ritual. It occurred to me that the Trump was executed in brother Brand's style, but I kept my mouth shut, as Random had just promised to kill the person responsible and I still had need of Brand.

Concluding that we had learned whatever we had been brought thither to learn, we sought to return to our own world by means of Benedict's Trump. He transported us to that section of Kolvir which had seen our most recent battle with the forces of the black road. There, we learned that Benedict knew more than we had suspected concerning Martin.

Random persuaded Benedict to conduct him through Shadow to Martin's last known address—at the home of some people called the Tecys. He borrowed Star and they rode off together. At the time, I did not know that the mysterious arm I had removed from Benedict's ghost in Tir-na Nog'th was in my saddlebag.

Returning to Amber with Ganelon, I visited Random's wife Vialle to tell her he would be delayed, and I wound up telling her the entire story. I was considerably cheered by the visit, and I returned to my apartments for a nap rather than visit Brand, who had been asking for me.

At some dark hour I awoke, struck by an idea as to how I might visit Dworkin, our old mentor, now half-mad, who had helped me to escape from my cell some time before.

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I went down to the dungeons and cleaned the Trump he had drawn on the wall for purposes of his own exit. I was then able to use it myself, traveling to his quarters in a series of caverns in the place we had visited the previous morning. They were located at the back of the griffin's cave. The beast, I later learned, was actually set to guard him, to keep him away from the Pattern.

Mistaking me for Dad, Dworkin told me a great many things. The Pattern was somehow a projection of his own mind, now damaged, and his main desire now seemed to be to destroy it. An exile from Chaos, he had created the Pattern ages before, but had repented the act when it was damaged and had conspired with Dad to erase it—destroying the world in the process—with Dad to attempt its recreation in a purer form. Dad had not been too hot on the idea and had confined him, setting the griffin, Wixer, to guard. Dworkin's mind was obviously running in a strange rut, a thing he was the first to acknowledge, and it was difficult to get him to admit that there was a way the Pattern might be restored without going the apocalyptic route. About this time he suffered a spell. He had already demonstrated a controlled shapeshifting ability as a peculiar joke. Now an uncontrolled change seemed to come upon him and he warned me to flee. I did.

Taking some special Trumps from the drawer of the desk in his study, I transported myself to an unusual place just as he seemed about to attack me in his new form.

Looking about me then, searching my memory for correspondences, I concluded that I had just arrived at the Courts of Chaos.

VI.

WHERE? The senses are such uncertain things, and now mine were strained beyond their limits. The rock on which I stood . . . If I attempted to fix my gaze upon it, it took on the aspect of a pavement on a hot afternoon. It seemed to shift and waver, though my footing was undisturbed. And it was undecided as to the portion of the spectrum it might call home. It pulsated and flashed like the skin of an iguana. Looking upwards, I beheld a sky such as I had never before set eyes upon. At the moment, it was split down the middle—half of it of deepest night-black, and the stars danced within it. When I say danced, I do not mean twinkled; they cavorted and they shifted magnitudes; they darted and they circled; they flared to nova brilliance, then faded to nothing. It was a frightening spectacle to behold, and my stomach tightened within me as I experienced a profound acrophobia. Yet, shifting my gaze did little to improve the situation. The other half of the sky was like a bottle of colored sands, continuously shaken; belts of orange, yellow, red, blue, brown and purple turned and twisted; patches of green, mauve, gray and dead white came and went, sometimes snaking into belthood, replacing or joining the other writhing entities. And these, too, shimmered and wavered, creating impossible sensations of distance and nearness. At times, some or all seemed literally sky-high, and then again they came to fill the air before me, gauzy, transparent mists, translucent swaths or solid tentacles

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of color. It was not until later that I realized that the line which separated the black from the color was advancing slowly from my right while retreating to my left. It was as if the entire celestial mandala were rotating about a point directly overhead. As to the light source of the brighter half, it simply could not be determined. Standing there, I looked down upon what at first seemed a valley filled with countless explosions of color; but when the advancing darkness faced the display away the stars danced and burned within its depths as well as above, giving them the impression of a bottomless chasm. It was as if I stood at the end of the world, the end of the universe, the end of everything. But far, far out from where I stood, something hovered on a mount of sheerest black—a blackness itself, but edged and tempered with barely perceptible flashes of light. I could not guess at its size, for distance, depth, perspective were absent here. A single edifice? A group? A city? Or simply a place? The outline varied each time that it fell upon my retina. Now faint and misty sheets drifted slowly between us, twisting, as if long strands of gauze were buoyed by heated air. The mandala ceased its turning when it had exactly reversed itself. The colors were behind me now, and imperceptible unless I turned my head, an action I had no desire to take. It was pleasant standing there, staring at the formlessness from which all things eventually emerged . . . Before the Pattern, even, this thing was. I knew this, dimly but surely, at the very center of my consciousness. I knew this, because I was certain that I had been here before. Child of the man I had become, it seemed that I had been brought here in some distant day—whether by Dad or Dworkin, I could not now recall—and had stood or been held in this place or one very near to it, looking out upon the same scene with, I am certain, a similar lack of comprehension, a similar sense of apprehension. My pleasure was tinged with a nervous excitement, a sense of the forbidden, a feeling of dubious anticipation. Peculiarly, at that moment, there rose in me a longing for the Jewel I had had to abandon in my compost heap on the shadow Earth, the thing Dworkin had made so much of. Could it be that some part of me sought a defense or at least a symbol of resistance against whatever was out there? Probably.

As I continued to stare, fascinated, across the chasm, it was as if my eyes adjusted or the prospect shifted once again, subtly. For now I discerned tiny, ghostly forms moving within that place, like slow-motion meteors along the gauzy strands. I waited, regarding them carefully, courting some small understanding of the actions in which they were engaged. At length, one of the strands drifted very near. Shortly thereafter I had my answer.

There was a movement. One of the rushing forms grew larger, and I realized that it was following the twisting way that led toward me. In only a few moments, it took on the proportions of a horseman. As it came on, it assumed a semblance of solidity without losing that ghostly quality which seemed to cling to

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everything which lay before me. A moment later, I beheld a naked rider on a hairless horse, both deathly pale, rushing in my direction. The rider brandished a bone-white blade; his eyes and the eyes of the horse both flashed red. I did not really know whether he saw me, whether we existed on the same plane of reality, so unnatural was his mien. Yet I unsheathed Grayswandir and took a step backward as he approached.

His long white hair shed tiny sparkling motes, and when he turned his head I knew that he was coming for me, for then I felt his gaze like a cold pressure across the front of my body. I turned sidewise and raised my blade to guard.

He continued, and I realized that both he and the horse were bigger than I had thought. They came on. When they reached the point nearest me—some ten meters, perhaps—the horse reared as he drew it to a halt. They regarded me then, bobbing and swaying as if on a raft in a gently swelling sea.

"Your name!" the rider demanded. "Give me your name, who comes to this place!"

His voice produced a crackling sensation in my ears. It was all of one sound level, loud and without inflection.

I shook my head.

"I give my name when I choose, not when I am ordered to," I said. "Who are you?"

He gave three short barks, which I took to be a laugh.

"I will hale you down and about, where you will cry it out forever."

I pointed Grayswandir at his eyes.

"Talk is cheap," I said. "Whiskey costs money."

I felt a faint cool sensation just then, as if someone were toying with my Trump, thinking of me. But it was dim, weak, and I had no attention to spare, for the rider had passed some signal to his mount and the beast reared. The distance is too great, I decided. But this thought belonged to another shadow. The beast plunged ahead toward me, departing the tenuous roadway that had been its course.

Its leap bore it to a point far short of my position. But it did not fall from there and vanish, as I had hoped. It resumed the motions of galloping, and although its progress was not fully commensurate with the action, it did continue to advance across the abyss at about half-speed.

While this was occurring, I saw that in the distance from which it had come another figure appeared to be headed my way. Nothing to do but stand my ground, fight and hope that I could dispatch this attacker before the other was upon me.

As the rider advanced, his ruddy gaze flicked over my person and halted when it fell upon Grayswandir. Whatever the nature of the mad illumination at my back, it had tricked the delicate tracery on my blade to life once more, so that that portion of the Pattern it bore swam and sparkled along its length. The horseman was very near by then, but he drew back on the reins and his eyes leapt upward, meeting my own. His nasty grin vanished.

"I know you!" he said. "You are the one called Corwin!"

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But we had him, me and my ally momentum.

His mount's front hoofs fell upon the ledge and I rushed forward. The beast's reflexes caused it to seek equal footing for its hind legs despite the drawn reins. The rider swung his blade into a guard position as I came on, but I cross-stepped and attacked from his left. As he moved his blade cross-body, I was already lunging. Grayswandir sheared through his pale hide, entering beneath the sternum and above the guts.

I wrenched my blade free and gouts of fire poured like blood from his wound. His swordarm sagged and his mount uttered a shriek that was almost a whistle as the blazing stream fell upon its neck. I danced back as the rider slumped forward and the beast, now fully footed, plunged on toward me, kicking. I cut again, reflexively, defensively. My blade nicked its left foreleg, and it too, began to burn.

I sidestepped once again as it turned and made for me a second time. At that moment, the rider erupted into a pillar of light. The beast bellowed, wheeled and rushed away. Without pausing, it plunged over the edge and vanished into the abyss, leaving me with the memory of the smouldering head of a cat which had addressed me long ago and the chill which always accompanied the recollection.

I was backed against rock, panting. The wispy road had drifted nearer—ten feet, perhaps, from the ledge. I had developed a cramp in my left side. The second rider was rapidly approaching. He was not pale like the first. His hair was dark and there was color in his face. His mount was a properly maned sorrel. He bore a cocked and bolted crossbow. I glanced behind me and there was no retreat, no crevice into which I might back.

I wiped my palm on my trousers and gripped Grayswandir by the *forte* of the blade. I turned sideways, so as to present the narrowest target possible. I raised my blade between us, hilt level with my head, point toward the ground, the only shield I possessed.

The rider came abreast of me and halted at the nearest point on the gauzy strip. He raised the crossbow slowly, knowing that if he did not drop me instantly with his single shot, I might be able to hurl my blade like a spear. Our eyes met.

He was beardless, slim. Possibly light-eyed within the squint of his aim. He managed his mount well, with just the pressure of his legs. His hands were big, steady. Capable. A peculiar feeling passed over me as I beheld him.

The moment stretched beyond the point of action. He rocked backward and lowered the weapon slightly, though none of the tension left his stance.

"You," he called out. "Is that the blade Grayswandir?"

"Yes," I answered, "it is."

He continued his appraisal, and something within me looked for words to wear, failed, ran naked away through the night.

"What do you want here?" he asked.

"To depart," I said.

There was a *chish-chá*, as his bolt struck the rock far ahead and to the left of me.

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"Go then," he said. "This is a dangerous place for you."

He turned his mount back in the direction from which he had come.

I lowered Grayswandir.

"I won't forget you," I said.

"No," he answered. "Do not."

Then he galloped away, and moments later the gauze drifted off also.

I resheathed Grayswandir and took a step forward. The world was beginning to turn about me again, the light advancing on my right, the dark retreating to my left. I looked about for some way to scale the rocky prominence at my back. It seemed to rise only thirty or forty feet higher, and I wanted the view that might be available from its summit. My ledge extended to both my right and my left. On inspection, the way to the right narrowed quickly, however, without affording a suitable ascent. I turned and made my way to the left.

I came upon a rougher spot in a narrow place beyond a rocky shoulder. Running my gaze up its height, an ascent seemed possible. I checked behind me after the approach of additional threats. The ghostly roadway had drifted farther away; no new riders advanced. I commenced climbing.

The going was not difficult, though the height proved greater than it had seemed from below. Likely a symptom of the spatial distortion which seemed to have affected my sight of so much else in this place. After a time, I hauled myself up and stood erect at a point which afforded a better view in the direction opposite the abyss.

Once again, I beheld the chaotic colors. From my right, the darkness herded them. The land they danced above was rock-cropped and cratered, no sign of any life within it. Passing through its midst, however, from the far horizon to a point in the mountains somewhere to the right, inky and serpentine, ran what could only be the black road.

Another ten minutes of climbing and maneuvering, and I had positioned myself to view its terminus. It swept through a broad pass in the mountains and ran right to the very edge of the abyss. There, its blackness merged with that which filled the place, noticeable now only by virture of the fact that no stars shone through it. Using this occlusion to gauge it, I obtained the impression that it continued on to the dark eminence about which the misty strips drifted.

I stretched out on my belly, so as to disturb the outline of the low crest as little as possible to whatever unseen eyes might flick across it. Lying there, I thought upon the opening of this way. The damage to the Pattern had laid Amber open to this access, and I believed that my curse had provided the precipitating element. I felt now that it would have come to pass without me, but I was certain that I had done my part. The guilt was still partly mine though no longer entirely so, as I had once believed. I thought then of Eric, as he lay dying on Kolvir. He had said that as much as he hated me, he was saving his dying curse for the enemies of Amber. In other words, this, and these. Ironic. My efforts were now entirely directed toward making good on my least-liked brother's dying wish. His

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curse to cancel my curse, me as the agent. Fitting though, perhaps, in some larger sense.

I sought, and was pleased not to discover, ranks of glowing riders setting forth or assembling upon that road. Unless another raiding party was already under way Amber was still temporarily safe. A number of things immediately troubled me, however, Mainly, if time did indeed behave as peculiarly in that place as Dara's possible origin indicated, then why had there not been another attack? They had certainly had ample time in which to recover and prepare for another assault. Had something occurred recently, by Amber's time, that is, to alter the nature of their strategy? If so, what? My weapons? Brand's recovery?

Or something else?

I wondered, too, how far Benedict's outposts reached. Certainly not this far, or I should have been informed. Had he ever been to this place? Had any of the others, within recent memory, stood where I had just stood, looking upon the Courts of Chaos, knowing something that I did not know? I resolved to question Brand and Benedict in this regard as soon as I returned.

All of which led me to wonder how time was behaving with me, at that moment. Better not to spend any more time here than I had to, I decided. I scanned the other Trumps I had removed from Dworkin's desk. While they were all of them interesting, I was familiar with none of the scenes depicted. I slipped my own case then and riffled through to Random's Trump. Perhaps he was the one who had tried to contact me earlier. I raised his card and regarded it.

Shortly, it swam before my eyes and I looked upon a blurred kaleidescope of images, the impression of Random in their midst. Motion, and strangely twisting perspectives . . .

"Random," I said. "This is Corwin."

I felt his mind, but there was no response from it. It struck me then that he was in the middle of a hell-ride, all his concentration bent on warping the stuff of Shadow about him. He could not respond without losing control. I blocked the Trump with my hand, breaking the contact.

I cut to Gérard's card. Moments later, there was contact. I stood.

"Corwin, where are you?" he inquired.

"At the end of the world," I said. "I want to come home."

"Come ahead."

He extended his hand. I reached out and clasped it, stepped forward.

We were on the ground floor of the palace in Amber, in the sitting room to which we had all adjourned on the night of Brand's return. It seemed to be early morning. There was a fire going on the grate. No one else was present.

"I tried to reach you earlier," he said. "I think Brand did, too. But I can't be sure."

"How long have I been away?"

"Eight days," he said.

"Glad I hurried. What's happening?"

"Nothing untoward," he said. "I do not know what Brand wants. He kept asking for you, and I could not reach you. Finally, I gave him a deck and told him to see whether he

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could do any better. Apparently, he could not."

"I was distracted," I said, "and the time-flow differential was bad."

He nodded.

"I have been avoiding him now that he is out of danger. He is in one of his black moods again, and he insists he can take care of himself. He is right, in that, and it is just as well."

"Where is he now?"

"Back in his own quarters, and he was still there as of perhaps an hour ago—brooding."

"Has he been out at all?"

"A few brief walks. But not for the past several days."

"I guess I had best go see him then. Any word on Random?"

"Yes," he said. "Benedict returned several days ago. He said they had found a number of leads concerning Random's son. He helped him check on a couple of them. One led further, but Benedict felt he had best not be away from Amber for too long, things being as uncertain as they are. So he left Random to continue the search on his own. He gained something in the venture, though. He came back sporting an artificial arm—a beautiful piece of work. He can do anything with it that he could before."

"Really?" I said. "It sounds strangely familiar."

He smiled, nodded.

"He told me you had brought it back for him from Tir-na Nog'th. In fact, he wants to speak with you about it as soon as possible."

"I'll bet," I said. "Where is he now?"

"At one of the outposts he has established along the black road. You would have to reach him by Trump."

"Thanks," I said. "Anything further on Julian or Fiona?"

He shook his head.

"All right," I said, turning toward the door. "I guess I will go see Brand first."

"I'm curious to know what it is that he wants," he said.

"I will remember that," I told him.

I left the room and headed for the stair.

VII.

I rapped on Brand's door.

"Come in, Corwin," he said.

I did, deciding as I crossed the threshold that I would not ask him how he had known who it was. His room was a gloomy place, candles burning despite the fact that it was daytime and he had four windows. The shutters were closed on three of them. The fourth was only partway open. Brand stood beside this one, staring out toward the sea. He was dressed all in black velvet with a silver chain about his neck. His belt was also of silver—a fine, linked affair. He played with a small dagger, and did not look at me as I entered. He was still pale, but his beard was neatly trimmed and he looked well-scrubbed and a bit heavier than he had when last I had seen him.

"You are looking better," I said. "How are you feeling?"

He turned and regarded me, expressionless, his eyes half-closed.

"Where the hell have you been?" he said.

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"Hither and yon. What did you want to see me about?"

"I asked you where you've been."

"And I heard you," I said, reopening the door behind me. "Now I am going to go out and come back in. Supposing we start this conversation over again?"

He sighed.

"Wait a minute. I am sorry," he said. "Why are we all so thinskinned? I do not know. —All right. It may be better if I do start over again."

He sheathed his dagger and crossed to sit in a heavy chair of black wood and leather.

"I got to worrying about all the things we had discussed," he said, "and some that we had not. I waited what seemed an appropriate time for you to have concluded your business in Tir-na Nog'th and returned. I then inquired after you and was told you had not yet come back. I waited longer. First I was impatient, and then I grew concerned that you might have been ambushed by our enemies. When I inquired again later, I learned that you had been back only long enough to speak with Random's wife—it must have been a conversation of great moment—and then to take a nap. You then departed once more. I was irritated that you had not seen fit to keep me posted as to events, but I resolved to wait a bit longer. Finally, I asked Gérard to get hold of you with your Trump. When he failed, I was quite concerned. I tried it myself then, and while it seemed that I touched you on several occasions I could not get through. I feared for you, and now

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I see that I had nothing to fear all along. Hence, I was abrupt."

"I see," I said, taking a seat off to his right. "Actually, time was running faster for me than it was for you, so from where I am sitting I have hardly been away. You are probably further recuperated from your puncture than I am from mine."

He smiled faintly and nodded.

"That is something, anyway," he said, "for my pains."

"I have had a few pains myself," I said, "so don't give me any more. You wanted me for something. Let's have it."

"Something is bothering you," he said. "Perhaps we ought to discuss that first."

"All right," I said. "Let's."

I turned and looked at the painting on the wall beside the door. An oil, a rather somber rendering of the well at Mirata, two men standing beside their horses nearby, talking.

"You've a distinctive style," I said.

"In all things," he replied.

"You stole my next sentence," I said, locating Martin's Trump and passing it to him.

He remained expressionless as he examined it, gave me one brief, sidelong look and then nodded.

"I cannot deny my hand," he said.

"It executed more than that card, your hand. Didn't it?"

He traced his upper lip with the tip of his tongue.

"Where did you find it?" he asked.

"Right where you left it, at the heart of things—in the real Amber."

"So . . ." he said, rising from the chair and returning to the window, holding up the card as if to study it in a better light. "So," he repeated, "you are aware of more than I had guessed. How did you learn of the primal Pattern?"

I shook my head.

"You answer my question first: Did you stab Martin?"

He turned toward me once again, stared a moment, then nodded sharply. His eyes continued to search my face.

"Why?" I asked.

"Someone had to," he explained, "to open the way for the powers we needed. We drew straws."

"And you won."

"Won. Lost?" He shrugged. "What does any of this matter now? Things did not come about as we had intended. I am a different person now than I was then."

"Did you kill him?"

"What?"

"Martin, Random's son. Did he die as a result of the wound you inflicted?"

He turned his hands palms upward.

"I do not know," he said. "If he did not, it was not because I did not try. You need look no further. You have found your guilty party. Now that you have, what are you going to do?"

I shook my head.

"I? Nothing. For all I know, the lad may still be living."

"Then let us move on to matters of greater moment. For how long have you known of the existence of the true Pattern?"

"Long enough," I said. "Its ori-

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gin, its functions, the effect of the blood of Amber upon it— Long enough. I paid more attention to Dworkin than you might have thought. I saw no gain to be had in damaging the fabric of existence, though. So I let Rover lie sleeping for a long, long while. It did not even occur to me until I spoke with you recently that the black road might have been connected with such foolishness. When I went to inspect the Pattern I found Martin's Trump and all the rest."

"I was not aware that you were acquainted with Martin."

"I have never set eyes on him."

"Then how were you aware he was the subject of the Trump?"

"I was not alone in that place."

"Who was with you?"

I smiled.

"No, Brand. It is still your turn. You told me when last we talked that the enemies of Amber hied all the way from the Courts of Chaos, that they have access to the realm via the black road because of something you and Bleys and Fiona had done back when you were of one mind as to the best way to take the throne. Now I know what it is that you did. Yet Benedict has been watching the black road and I have just looked upon the Courts of Chaos. There is no new massing of forces, no movement toward us upon that road. I know that time flows differently in that place. They should have had more than enough time to ready a new assault. I want to know what is holding them back. Why have they not moved? What are they waiting for, Brand?"

"You credit me with more knowledge than I possess."

"I don't think so. You are the resident expert on the subject. You have dealt with them. That Trump is evidence that you have been holding back on other matters. Don't weasel, just talk."

"The Courts . . ." he said. "You have been busy. Eric was a fool not to have killed you immediately—if he was aware you had knowledge of these things."

"Eric was a fool," I acknowledged. "You are not. Now talk."

"But I am a fool," he said, "a sentimental one, at that. Do you recall the day of our last argument, here in Amber, so long ago?"

"Somewhat."

"I was sitting on the edge of my bed. You were standing by my writing desk. As you turned away and headed toward the door, I resolved to kill you. I reached beneath my bed, where I keep a cocked crossbow with a bolt in it. I actually had my hand on it and was about to raise it when I realized something which stopped me."

He paused.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Look over there by the door."

I looked, I saw nothing special. I began to shake my head, just as he said, "On the floor."

Then I realized what it was—russet and olive and brown and green, with a small geometric pattern.

He nodded.

"You were standing on my favorite rug. I did not want to get blood on it. Later, my anger passed. So I, too, am a victim of emotion and circumstance."

"Lovely story—" I began.

"—but now you want me to stop

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stalling. I was not stalling, however. I was attempting to make a point. We are all of us alive by one another's sufferance and an occasional fortunate accident. I am going to propose suspending that sufferance and eliminating the possibility of accident in a couple of very important cases. First though, to answer your question, while I do not know for certain what is holding them back, I can venture a very good guess. Bleys has assembled a large strike force for an attack on Amber. It will be nowhere near the scale of the one on which you accompanied him, however. You see, he will be counting on the memory of that last attack to have conditioned the response to this one. It will probably also be preceeded by attempts to assassinate Benedict and yourself. The entire affair will be a feint, though. I would guess that Fiona has contacted the Courts of Chaos—may even be there right now—and has prepared them for the real attack, which might be expected any time after Bleys' diversionary foray. Therefore—"

"You say this is a very good guess," I interrupted. "But we do not even know for certain that Bleys is still living."

"Bleys is alive," he said. "I was able to ascertain his existence via his Trump—even a brief assessment of his current activities—before he became aware of my presence and blocked me out. He is very sensitive to such surveillance. I found him in the field with troops he intends to employ against Amber."

"And Fiona?"

"No," he said, "I did no experimenting with her Trump, and I would advise you not to either. She is extremely dangerous, and I did not want to lay myself open to her influence. My estimate of her current situation is based on deduction rather than direct knowledge. I would be willing to rely on it, though."

"I see," I said.

"I have a plan."

"Go ahead."

"The manner in which you retrieved me from durance was quite inspired, combining the forces of everyone's concentration as you did. The same principle could be utilized again, to a different end. A force such as that would break through a person's defense fairly easily—even someone like Fiona, if the effort is properly directed."

"That is to say, directed by yourself?"

"Of course. I propose that we assemble the family and force our way through to Bleys and Fiona, wherever they may be. We hold them, locked in the full, in the flesh, just for a moment or so. Just long enough for me to strike."

"As you did Martin?"

"Better, I trust. Martin was able to break free at the last moment. That should not occur this time, with all of you helping. Even three or four would probably be sufficient."

"You really think you can pull it off, that easily?"

"I know we had better try. Time is running. You will be one of the ones executed when they take Amber. So will I. What do you say?"

"If I become convinced that it is necessary. Then I would have no

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choice but to go along with it."

"It is necessary, believe me. The next thing is that I will need the Jewel of Judgment."

"What for?"

"If Fiona is truly in the Courts of Chaos, the Trump alone will probably be insufficient to reach her and hold her—even with all of us behind it. In her case, I will require the Jewel to focus our energies."

"I suppose that could be arranged."

"Then the sooner we are about it the better. Can you set things up for tonight? I am sufficiently recovered to handle my end of it."

"Hell no," I said, standing.

"What do you mean?" He clenched the arms of the chair, half-rising. "Why not?"

"I said I would go along with it if I became convinced that it was necessary. You have admitted that a lot of this is conjecture. That alone is sufficient to keep me from being convinced."

"Forget about being convinced then. Can you afford to take the chance? The next attack is going to be a lot stronger than the last, Corwin. They are aware of your new weapons. They are going to allow for this in their planning."

"Even if I agreed with you, Brand, I am certain I could not convince the others that the executions are necessary."

"Convince them? Just tell them! You've got them all by the throat, Corwin! You are on top right now. You want to stay there, don't you?"

"I smiled and moved toward the door.

"I will, too," I said, "by doing things my way. I will keep your suggestion on file."

"Your way is going to get you dead. Sooner than you think."

"I am standing on your rug again," I said.

He laughed.

"Very good. But I was not threatening you. You know what I meant. You are responsible for all of Amber now. You have to do the right thing."

"And you know what I meant. I am not going to kill a couple more of us because of your suspicions. I would need more than that."

"When you get it, it may be too late."

I shrugged.

"We'll see."

I reached toward the door.

"What are you going to do now?"

I shook my head.

"I don't tell anybody everything that I know, Brand. It is a kind of insurance."

"I can appreciate that. I only hope that you know enough."

"Or perhaps you fear that I know too much," I said.

For a moment a wary look danced on the muscles beneath his eyes. Then he smiled.

"I am not afraid of you, brother," he said.

"It is good to have nothing to fear," I said.

I opened the door.

"Wait," he said.

"Yes?"

"You neglected to tell me who was with you when you discovered Martin's Trump, in the place where I had left it."

"Why, it was Random," I said.

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"Oh. Is he aware of the particulars?"

"If you mean, does he know that you stabbed his son," I said, "the answer is no, not yet."

"I see. And of Benedict's new arm? I understand that you somehow got it for him in Tir-na Nog'th. I would like to know more about this."

"Not now," I said. "Let's save something for our next get-together. It won't be all that long."

I went on out and closed the door, my silent regards to the rug.

VIII.

After visiting the kitchens, compiling an enormous meal and demolishing it, I headed for the stables, where I located a handsome young sorrel which had once belonged to Eric. I made friends with him in spite of this, and a short while later we were moving toward the trail down Kolvir which would take us to the camp of my Shadow forces. As I rode and digested, I tried to sort out the events and revelations of what, to me, had been the past few hours. If Amber had indeed arisen as the result of Dworkin's act of rebellion within the Courts of Chaos, then it followed that we were all of us related to the very forces which now threatened us. It was of course difficult to decide how far anything Dworkin said might now be trusted. Yet, the black road did run to the Courts of Chaos, apparently as a direct result of Brand's ritual, a thing which he had based on principles learned from Dworkin. Fortunately, for now, the parts of Dworkin's narrative which required the greatest credulity were those things which were not of any great moment, from an immediate, pragmatic standpoint. Still, I had mixed feelings about being descended from a unicorn—

"Corwin!"

I drew rein. I opened my mind to the sending and the image of Ganelon appeared.

"I am here," I said. "Where did you get hold of a set of Trumps? And learn how to use them?"

"I picked up a pack from the case in the library awhile back. Thought it a good idea to have a way of getting in touch with you in a hurry. As for using them, I just did what you and the others seem to do—study the Trump, think about it, concentrate on getting in touch with the person."

"I should have gotten you a pack long ago," I said. "It was an oversight on my part which I am glad you've remedied. Are you just testing them now, or did something come up?"

"Something," he said. "Where are you?"

"As chance would have it, I am on my way down to see you."

"You are all right?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Come ahead then. I'd rather not try bringing you through this thing, the way you people do. It is not that urgent. I will see you by and by."

"Yes."

He broke the contact and I rustled the reins and continued on. For a moment, I had been irritated that he had not simply asked me for a deck. Then I recalled that I had been away for over a week, by

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Amber's time. He had probably been getting worried, didn't trust any of the others to do it for him. Perhaps rightly so.

The descent went quickly, as did the balance of the journey to the camp. The horse—whose name, by the way, was Drum—seemed happy to be going somewhere and had a tendency to pull away at the least excuse. I gave him his head at one point to tire him a bit, and it was not too long afterwards that I sighted the camp. I realized at about that time that I missed Star.

I was the subject of stares and salutes as I rode into camp. A silence followed me and all activity ceased as I passed. I wondered whether they believed I had come to deliver a battle order.

Ganelon emerged from his tent before I had dismounted.

"Fast," he observed, clasping my hand as I came down. "Pretty horse, that."

"Yes," I agreed, turning the reins over to his orderly. "What news have you?"

"Well . . ." he said. "I've been talking to Benedict . . ."

"Movement on the back road?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. He came to see me after he returned from those friends of his—the Tecys—to tell me that Random was all right, that he was following a lead as to Martin's whereabouts. We got to talking of other matters after that, and finally he asked me to tell him everything I knew about Dara. Random had told him about her walking the Pattern, and he had decided then that too many people other than yourself were aware of her existence."

"So what did you tell him?"

"Everything."

"Including the guesswork, the speculation—after Tir-na Nog'th?"

"Just so."

"I see. How did he take this?"

"He seemed excited about it. Happy, I'd even say. Come talk with him yourself."

I nodded and he turned toward his tent. He pushed back the flap and stepped aside. I entered.

Benedict was seated on a low stool beside a foot locker atop which a map had been spread. He was tracing something on the map with the long metal finger of the glinting, skeletal hand attached to the deadly, silver-cabled, fire-pinned mechanical arm I had brought back from the city in the sky, the entire device now attached to the stump of his right arm a little below the point where the sleeve had been cut away from his brown shirt, a transformation which halted me with a momentary shudder, so much did he resemble the ghost I had encountered. His eyes rose to meet my own and he raised the hand in greeting, a casual, perfectly executed gesture, and he smiled the broadest smile I had ever seen crease his face.

"Corwin!" he said, and then he rose and extended that hand.

I had to force myself to clasp the device which had almost killed me. But Benedict looked more kindly disposed toward me than he had in a long while. I shook the new hand and its pressures were perfect. I tried to disregard its coldness and angularity and almost succeeded, in my amazement at the control he had acquired over it.

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"I owe you an apology," he said. "I have wronged you. I am very sorry."

"It's all right," I said. "I understand."

He clasped me for a moment, and my belief that things had apparently been set right between us was darkened only by the grip of those precise and deadly fingers on my shoulder.

Ganelon chuckled and brought up another stool, which he set at the other end of the locker. My irritation at his having aired the subject I had not wanted mentioned, whatever the circumstances, was submerged by the sight of its effects: I could not remember having seen Benedict in better spirits; Ganelon was obviously pleased at having effected the resolution of our differences.

I smiled myself and accepted a seat, unbuckling my swordbelt and hanging Grayswandir on the tentpole. Ganelon produced three glasses and a bottle of wine. As he set the glasses before us and poured, he remarked, "To return the hospitality of your tent, that night, back in Avalon."

Benedict took up his glass with but the faintest of clicks.

"There is more ease in this tent," he said. "Is that not so, Corwin?"

I nodded and raised my glass.

"To that ease. May it always prevail."

"I have had my first opportunity in a long while," he said, "to talk with Random at some length. He has changed quite a bit."

"Yes," I agreed.

"I am more inclined to trust him now than I was in days gone by. We had some time to talk after we left the Tecys."

"Where were you headed?"

"Some comments Martin had made to his host seemed to indicate that he was going to a place I knew of further off in Shadow—the block city of Heerat. We journeyed there and found this to be correct. He had passed that way."

"I am not familiar with Heerat," I said.

"A place of adobe and stone—a commercial center at the junction of several trade routes. There, Random found news which took him eastward and probably deeper into Shadow. We parted company at Heerat, for I did not want to be away from Amber overlong. Also, there was a personal matter I was anxious to pursue. He told me how he had seen Dara walk the Pattern on the day of the battle."

"That's right," I said. "She did. I was there, too."

He nodded.

"As I said, Random had impressed me. I was inclined to believe he was telling the truth. If this were so, then it was possible that you were also. Granting this, I had to pursue the matter of the girl's allegations. You were not available, so I came to Ganelon—this was several days ago—and had him tell me everything he knew about Dara."

I glanced at Ganelon, who inclined his head slightly.

"So you now believe you have uncovered a new relative," I said, "a mendacious one, to be sure, and quite possibly an enemy—but a relative, nevertheless. What next?"

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He took a sip of wine.

"I would like to believe in the relationship," he said. "The notion somehow pleases me. So I would like to establish it or negate it to a certainty. If it turns out that we are indeed related, then I would like to understand the motives behind her actions. And I would like to learn why she never made her existence known to me directly." He put down his glass, raised his new hand and flexed the fingers. "So I would like to begin," he continued, "by learning of those things you experienced in Tir-na Nog'th which apply to me and to Dara. I am also extremely curious about this hand, which behaves as if it were made for me. I have never heard of a physical object being obtained in the city in the sky." He made a fist, unclenched it, rotated the wrist, extended the arm, raised it, lowered it gently to his knee. "Random performed a very effective piece of surgery, don't you think?" he concluded.

"Very," I agreed.

"So, will you tell me the story?"

I nodded and took a sip of my wine.

"It was in the palace in the sky that it occurred," I said. "The place was filled with inky, shifting shadows. I felt impelled to visit the throne room. I did this, and when the shadows moved aside, I saw you standing to the right of the throne, wearing that arm. When things cleared further, I saw Dara seated upon the throne. I advanced and touched her with Grayswandir, which made me visible to her. She declared me dead these several centuries and bade me return to my grave. When I demanded her lineage, she said she was descended of you and of the hellmaid Lintra.

Benedict drew a deep breath but said nothing. I continued:

"Time, she said, moved at such a different rate in the place of her birth, that several generations had passed there. She was the first of them possessed of regular human attributes. She again bade me depart. During this time, you had been studying Grayswandir. You struck then to remove her from danger, and we fought. My blade could reach you and your hand could reach me. That was all. Otherwise, it was a confrontation of ghosts. As the sun began to rise and the city to fade, you had me in a grip with that hand. I struck it free of the arm with Grayswandir and escaped. It was returned with me because it was still clasping my shoulder."

"Curious," Benedict said. "I have known that place to render false prophecies—the fears and hidden desires of the visitor, rather than a true picture of what is to be. But then, it often reveals unknown truths as well. And as in most other things, it is difficult to separate the valid from the spurious. How did you read it?"

"Benedict," I said, "I am inclined to believe the story of her origin. You have never seen her, but I have. She does resemble you in some ways. As for the rest . . .It is doubtless as you said—that which is left after the truth has been separated out."

He nodded slowly, and I could tell that he was not convinced but did not want to push the matter. He knew as well as I did what the rest

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implied. If he were to pursue his claim to the throne and succeed in achieving it, it was possible that he might one day step aside in favor of his only descendant.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him.

"Do?" he said. "What is Random now doing about Martin? I shall seek her, find her, have the story from her own lips and then decide for myself. This will have to wait, however, until the matter of the black road is settled. That is another matter I wish to discuss with you."

"Yes?"

"If time moves so differently in their stronghold, they have had more than they need in which to mount another attack. I do not want to keep waiting to meet them in indecisive encounters. I am contemplating following the black road back to its source and attacking them on their home ground. I would like to do it with your concurrence."

"Benedict," I said, "have you ever looked upon the Courts of Chaos?"

He raised his head and stared at the blank wall of the tent.

"Ages ago, when I was young," he said, "I hellrode as far as I might go, to the end of everything. There, beneath a divided sky, I looked upon an awesome abyss. I do not know if the place lies there or if the road runs that far, but I am prepared to take that way again, if such is the case."

"Such is the case," I said.

"How can you be certain?"

"I am just returned from that land. A dark citadel hovers within it. The road goes to it."

"How difficult was the way?"

"Here," I said, taking out the Trump and passing it to him. "This was Dworkin's. I found it among his things. I only just tried it. It took me there. Time is already rapid at that point. I was attacked by a rider on a drifting roadway, of a sort not shown on the card. Trump contact is difficult there, perhaps because of the time differential. Gérard brought me back."

He studied the card.

"It seems the place I saw that time," he said at length. "This solves our logistics problems. With one of us on either end of a Trump connection we can transport the troops right through, as we did that day from Kolvir to Garnath."

I nodded.

"That is one of the reasons I showed it to you, to indicate my good faith. There may be another way, involving less risk than running our forces into the unknown. I want you to hold off on this venture until I have explored my way further."

"I will have to hold off in any event, to obtain some intelligence concerning that place. We do not even know whether your automatic weapons will function there, do we?"

"No, I did not have one along to test."

He pursed his lips.

"You really should have thought to take one and test it."

"The circumstances of my departure did not permit this."

"Circumstances?"

"Another time. It is not relevant here. You spoke of following the

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black road to its source . . .''

''Yes?''

''That is not its true source. Its real source lies in the true Amber, in the defect in the primal Pattern.''

''Yes, I understand that. Both Random and Ganelon have described your journey to the place of the true Pattern, and the damage you discovered there. I see the analogy, the possible connection—''

''Do you recall my flight from Avalon, and your pursuit?''

In answer, he only smiled faintly.

''There was a point where we crossed the black road,'' I said. ''Do you recall it?''

He narrowed his yes.

''Yes,'' he said. ''You cut a path through it. The world had returned to normal at that point. I had forgotten.''

''It was an effect of the Pattern upon it,'' I said, ''One which I believe can be employed upon a much larger scale.''

''How much larger?''

''To wipe out the entire thing.''

He leaned back and studied my face.

''Then why are you not about it?''

''There are a few preliminaries I must undertake.''

''How much time will they involve?''

''Not too much. Possibly as little as a few days. Perhaps a few weeks.''

''Why didn't you mention all of this sooner?''

''I only learned how to go about it recently.''

''How *do* you go about it?''

''Basically, it amounts to repairing the Pattern.''

''All right,'' he said. ''Say you succeed. The enemy will still be out there.'' He gestured toward Garnath and the black road. ''Someone gave them passage once.''

''The enemy has always been out there,'' I said. ''And it will be up to us to see that they are not given passage again—by dealing properly with those who provided it in the first place.''

''I go along with you on that,'' he said, ''but that is not what I meant. They require a lesson, Corwin. I want to teach them a proper respect for Amber, such a respect that even if the way is opened again they will fear to use it. That is what I meant. It is necessary.''

''You do not know what it would be like to carry a battle to that place, Benedict. It is—literally—indescribable.''

He smiled and stood.

''Then I guess I had best go see for myself,'' he said. ''I will keep this card for a time, if you don't mind.''

''I don't mind.''

''Good. Then you be on with your business about the Pattern, Corwin, and I will be about my own. This will take me some time, too. I must go give my commanders orders concerning my absence now. Let us agree that neither of us commence anything of a final nature without checking first with the other.''

''Agreed,'' I said.

We finished our wine.

''I will be underway myself, very soon now,'' I said. ''So, good luck.''

''To you, also.'' He smiled again. ''Things are better,'' he said,

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and he clasped my shoulder as he passed to the entrance.

We followed him outside.

"Bring Benedict's horse," Ganelon directed the orderly who stood beneath a nearby tree; and turning, he offered Benedict his hand, "I, too, want to wish you luck," he said.

Benedict nodded and shook his hand.

"Thank you, Ganelon. For many things."

Benedict withdrew his Trumps.

"I can bring Gérard up to date," he said, "before my horse arrives."

He riffled through them, withdrew one, studied it.

"How do you go about repairing the Pattern?" Ganelon asked me.

"I have to get hold of the Jewel of Judgment again," I said. "With it, I can reinscribe the damaged area."

"Is this dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Where is the Jewel?"

"Back on the shadow Earth, where I left it."

"Why did you abandon it?"

"I feared that it was killing me."

He contorted his features into a near-impossible grimace.

"I don't like the sound of this, Corwin. There must be another way."

"If I knew a better way, I'd take it."

"Supposing you just followed Benedict's plan and took them all on? You said yourself that he could raise infinite legions in Shadow. You also said that he is the best man there is in the field."

"Yet the damage would remain in the Pattern, and something else would come to fill it. Always. The enemy of the moment is not as important as our own inner weakness. If this is not mended we are already defeated, though no foreign conqueror stands within our walls."

He turned away.

"I cannot argue with you. You know your own realm," he said. "But I still feel you may be making a grave mistake by risking yourself on what may prove unnecessary at a time when you are very much needed."

I chuckled, for it was Vialle's word and I had not wanted to call it my own when she had said it.

"It is my duty," I told him.

He did not reply.

Benedict, a dozen paces away, had apparently reached Gérard, for he would mutter something, then pause and listen. We stood there, waiting for him to conclude his conversation so that we could see him off.

". . . . Yes, he is here now," I heard him say. "No, I doubt that very much. But—"

Benedict glanced at me several times and shook his head.

"No, I do not think so," he said. Then, "All right, come ahead."

He extended his new hand, and Gérard stepped into being, clasping it. Gérard turned his head, saw me and immedaitely moved in my direction.

He ran his eyes up and down and back and forth across my entire person, as if searching for something.

"What is the matter?" I said.

"Brand," he replied, "he is no longer in his quarters. At least, most of him isn't. He left a lot of blood behind. The place is also

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broken up enough to show there had been a fight."

I glanced down at my shirtfront and trousers.

"And you are looking for bloodstains? As you can see, these are the same things I had on earlier. They may be dirty and wrinkled but that's all."

"That does not really prove anything," he said.

"It was your idea to look. Not mine. What makes you think I—"

"You were the last one to see him," he said.

"Except for the person he had a fight with—if he really did."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know his temper, his moods. We had a small argument. He might have started breaking things up after I left, maybe cut himself, gotten disgusted, trumped out for a change of scene. —Wait! His rug! Was there any blood on that small, fancy rug before his door?"

"I am not sure. —No, I don't think so. Why?"

"Circumstantial evidence that he did it himself. He was very fond of that rug. He avoided messing it."

"I don't buy it," Gérard said, "and Caine's death still looks peculiar—and Benedict's servants who could have found out you wanted gunpowder. Now Brand—"

"This could well be another attempt to frame me," I said, "and Benedict and I have come to better terms."

He turned toward Benedict, who had not moved from where he stood a dozen paces away, regarding us without expression, listening.

"Has he explained away those deaths?" Gérard asked him.

"Not directly," Benedict answered, "but much of the rest of the story now stands in a better light. So much so, that I am inclined to believe the best."

Gérard shook his head and glared down at me again.

"Still unsettled," he said. "What were you and Brand arguing about?"

"Gérard," I said, "that is our business, till Brand and I decide otherwise."

"I dragged him back to life and watched over him, Corwin. I didn't do it just to see him killed in a squabble."

"Use your brains," I told him. "Whose idea was it to search for him the way that we did? To bring him back?"

"You wanted something from him," he said. "You finally got it. Then he became an impediment."

"No. But even if that were the case, do you think I would be so damned obvious about it? If he has been killed, then it is on the same order as Caine's death—an attempt to frame me."

"You used the obviousness excuse with Caine, too. It seems to me it could be a kind of subtlety—a thing you are good at."

"We have been through this before, Gérard . . ."

". . . . And you know what I told you then."

"It would be difficult to have forgotten."

He reached forward and seized my right shoulder. I immediately drove my left hand into his stomach and pulled away. It occurred to me then that perhaps I should have told

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him what Brand and I had been talking about. But I didn't like the way he had asked me.

He came at me again. I sidestepped and caught him with a light left near the right eye. I kept jabbing after that, mainly to keep his head back. I was in no real shape to fight him again, and Grayswandir was back in the tent. I had no other weapon with me.

I kept circling him. My side hurt if I kicked with my left leg. I caught him once on the thigh with my right, but I was slow and off-balance and could not really follow through. I continued to jab.

Finally, he blocked my left and managed to drop his hand on my biceps. I should have pulled away then, but he was open. I stepped in with a heavy right to his stomach, all of my strength behind it. It bent him forward with a gasp, but his grip tightened on my arm. He blocked my attempted uppercut with his left, continuing its forward motion until the heel of his hand slammed against my chest, at the same time jerking my left arm backwards and to the side with such force that I was thrown to the ground. If he came down on me, that was it.

He dropped to one knee and reached for my throat.

IX.

I moved to block his hand, but it halted in mid-reach. Turning my head, I saw that another hand had fallen upon Gérard's arm, was now grasping it, was holding it back.

I rolled away. When I looked up again, I saw that Ganelon had caught hold of him. Gérard jerked his arm forward, but it did not come free.

"Stay out of this, Ganelon," he said.

"Get going, Corwin!" Ganelon said. "Get the Jewel!"

Even as he called out, Gérard was beginning to rise. Ganelon crossed with his left and connected with Gérard's jaw. Gérard sprawled at his feet. Ganelon moved in and swung a kick toward his kidney, but Géard caught his foot and heaved him over backwards. I scrambled back into a crouch, supporting myself with one hand.

Gérard came up off the ground and rushed Ganelon, who was just recovering his feet. As he was almost upon him, Ganelon came up with a double-fisted blow to Gérard's midsection which halted him in his tracks. Instantly, Ganelon's fists were moving like pistons against Gérard's abdomen. For several moments, Gérard seemed too dazed to protect himself, and when he finally bent and brought his arms in, Ganelon caught him with a right to the jaw that staggered him backwards. Ganelon immediately rushed forward, throwing his arms about Gérard as he slammed into him and hooking his right leg behind Gérard's own. Gérard toppled and Ganelon fell upon him. He straddled Gérard then and drove his right fist against his jaw. When Gérard's head rolled back, he crossed with his left.

Benedict suddenly moved to intervene, but Ganelon chose that moment to rise to his feet. Gérard

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lay unconscious, bleeding from his mouth and nose.

I got shakily to my own feet, dusted myself off.

Ganelon grinned at me.

"Don't stay around," he said. "I don't know how I would do in a rematch. Go find the trinket."

I glanced at Benedict and he nodded. I returned to the tent for Grayswandir. When I emerged, Gérard still had not moved, but Benedict stood before me.

"Remember," he said, "you've my Trump and I've yours. Nothing final without a conference."

I nodded. I was going to ask him why he had seemed willing to help Gérard, but not me. But second thoughts had me and I decided against spoiling our fresh-minted amity.

"Okay."

I headed toward the horses. Ganelon clapped me on the shoulder as I came up to him.

"Good luck," he said. "I'd go with you, but I am needed here—especially with Benedict trumping off to Chaos."

"Good show," I said. "I shouldn't have any trouble. Don't worry."

I went off to the paddock. Shortly, I was mounted and moving. Ganelon threw me a salute as I passed and I returned it. Benedict was kneeling beside Gérard.

I headed for the nearest trail into Arden. The sea lay at my back, Garnath and the black road to the left, Kolvir to my right. I had to gain some distance before I could work with the stuff of Shadow. The day lay clean once Garnath was lost to sight, several rises and dips later. I struck the trail and followed its long curve into the wood, where moist shadows and distant birdsongs reminded me of the long periods of peace we had known of old and the silken, gleaming presence of the maternal unicorn.

My aches faded into the rhythm of the ride, and I thought once again of the encounter I had departed. It was not difficult to understand Gérard's attitude, since he had already told me of his suspicions and issued me a warning. Still, it was such bad timing for whatever had happened with Brand that I could not but see it as another action intended either to slow me or to stop me entirely. It was fortunate that Ganelon had been on hand, in good shape and able to put his fists in the right places at the proper times. I wondered what Benedict would have done if there had only been the three of us present. I'd a feeling he would have waited and intervened only at the very last moment, to stop Gérard from killing me. I was still not happy with our accord, though it was certainly an improvement over the previous state of affairs.

All of which made me wonder again what had become of Brand. Had Fiona or Bleys finally gotten to him? Had he attempted his proposed assassinations singlehanded and been met with a counterthrust, then dragged through his intended victim's Trump? Had his old allies from the Courts of Chaos somehow gotten through to him? Had one of his horny handed guardians from the Tower finally been able to reach him? Or had it been as I had suggested to Gérard—an accidental

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self-injury in a fit of rage, followed by an ill-tempered flight from Amber to do his brooding and plotting elsewhere?

When that many questions arise from a single event the answer is seldom obtainable by pure logic. I had to sort out the possibilities though, to have something to reach for when more facts did turn up. In the meantime, I thought carefully over everything he had told me, regarding his allegations in light of those things which I now knew. With one exception, I did not doubt most of the facts. He had built too cleverly to have the edifice simply toppled—but then, he had had a lot of time to think these things over. No, it was in his manner of presenting events that something had been hidden by misdirection. His recent proposal practically assured me of that.

The old trail twisted, widened, narrowed again, swung to the northwest and downward, into the thickening wood. The forest had changed very little. It seemed almost the same trail a young man had ridden centuries before, riding for the sheer pleasure of it, riding to explore that vast green realm which extended over most of the continent, if he did not stray into Shadow. It would be good to be doing it again for no reason other than this.

After perhaps an hour, I had worked my way well back into the forest, where the trees were great dark towers, what sunlight I glimpsed caught like phoenix nests in their highest branches, an always moist, twilight softness smoothing the outlines of stumps and boles, logs and mossy rocks. A deer bounded across my path, not trusting to the excellent concealment of a thicket at the right of the trail. Birdnotes sounded about me, never too near. Occasionally, I crossed the tracks of other horsemen. Some of these were quite fresh, but they did not stay long with the trail. Kolvir was well out of sight, had been for some time.

The trail rose again, and I knew that I would shortly reach the top of a small ridge, pass among rocks and head downward once more. The trees thinned somewhat as we climbed, until finally I was afforded a partial view of the sky. It was enlarged as I continued, and when I came to the summit I heard the distant cry of a hunting bird.

Glancing upward, I saw a great dark shape, circling and circling, high above me. I hurried past the boulders and shook the reins for a burst of speed as soon as the way was clear. We plunged downward, racing to get under cover of the larger trees once again.

The bird cried out as we did this, but we won to the shade, to the dimness, without incident. I slowed gradually after that and continued to listen, but there were no untoward sounds on the air. This part of the forest was pretty much the same as that we had left beyond the ridge, save for a small stream we picked up and paralleled for a time, finally crossing it at a shallow ford. Beyond, the trail widened and a little more light leaked through and flowed with us for half a league. We had almost come a sufficient distance for me to begin those small manipulations of Shadow which

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would bear me to the pathway back to the shadow Earth of my former exile. Yet, it would be difficult to begin here, easier farther along. I resolved to save the strain on myself and my mount by continuing to a better beginning. Nothing of a threatening nature had really occurred. The bird could be a wild hunter, probably was.

Only one thought nagged at me as I rode.

Julian . . .

Arden was Julian's preserve, patrolled by his rangers, sheltering several encampments of his troops at all times—Amber's inland border guard, both against incursions natural and against those things which might appear at the boundaries of Shadow.

Where did Julian go when he had departed the palace so suddenly on the night of Brand's stabbing? If he wished simply to hide, there was no necessity for him to flee farther than this. Here he was strong, backed by his own men, moving in a realm he knew far better than the rest of us. It was quite possible that he was not right now, too far away. Also, he liked to hunt. He had his hellhounds, he had his birds . . .

A half mile, a mile . . .

Just then, I heard the sound that I feared most. Piercing the green and the shade, there came the notes of a hunting horn. They came from some distance behind me, and I think from the left of the trail.

I urged my mount to a gallop and the trees rushed to a blur on either side. The trail was straight and level here. We took advantage of this.

Then from behind, I heard a roar—a kind of deep-chested coughing, growling sound backed by a lot of resonant lung space. I did not know what it was that had uttered it, but it was no dog. Not even a hellhound sounded like that. I glanced back, but there was no pursuit in sight. So I kept low and talked to Drum a bit.

After a time, I heard a crashing noise in the woods off to my right, but the roar was not repeated just then. I looked again, several times, but I was unable to make out what it was that was causing the disturbance. Shortly thereafter, I heard the horn once more, much nearer, and this time it was answered by the barks and the baying which I could not mistake. The hellhounds were coming—swift, powerful, vicious beasts Julian had found in some shadow and trained to the hunt.

It was time, I decided, to begin the shift. Amber was still strong about me, but I laid hold of Shadow as best I could and started the movement.

The trail began to curve to the left, and as we raced along it the trees at either hand diminished in size, fell back. Another curve, and the trail led us through a clearing, perhaps a hundred meters across. I glanced up then and saw that that damned bird was still circling, much nearer now, close enough to be dragged with me through Shadow.

This was more complicated that I had intended. I wanted an open space in which to wheel my mount and swing a blade freely if it came to that. The occurrence of such a place, however, revealed my position quite clearly to the bird, whom

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it was proving difficult to lose.

All right. We came to a low hill, mounted it, started downward, passing a lone, lightning-blasted tree as we did. On its nearest branch sat a hawk of gray and silver and black. I whistled to it as we passed, and it leapt into the air, shrieking a savage battle cry.

Hurrying on, I heard the individual voices of the dogs, clearly now, and the thud of the horses' hoofs. Mixed in with these sounds there was something else, more a vibration, a shuddering of the ground. I looked back again, but none of my pursuit had yet topped the hill. I bent my mind toward the way away and clouds occluded the sun. Strange flowers appeared along the trail—green and yellow and purple—and there came a rumble of distant thunders. The clearing widened, lengthened. It became completely level.

I heard once again the sound of the horn. I turned for another look.

It bounded into view then, and I realized at that instant that I was not the object of the hunt, that the riders, the dogs, the bird were pursuing the thing that ran behind me. Of course, this was a rather academic distinction, in that I was in front, and quite possibly the object of *its* hunt. I leaned forward, shouting to Drum and digging in with my knees, realizing even as I did that the abomination was moving faster than we could. It was a panic reaction.

I was being pursued by a manticora.

The last time I had seen its like was on the day before the battle in which Eric died. As I had led my troops up the rearward slopes of Kolvir, it had appeared to tear a man named Rall in half. We had dispatched it with automatic weapons. The thing proved twelve feet in length, and like this one it had worn a human face on the head and shoulders of a lion; it, too, had had a pair of eagle-like wings folded against its sides and the long pointed tail of a scorpion curving in the air above it. A number of them had somehow wandered in from Shadow to devil our steps as we headed for that battle. There was no reason to believe all of them had been accounted for, save that none had been reported since that time and no evidence of their continued existence in the vicinity of Amber had come to light. Apparently, this one had wandered down into Arden and been living in the forest since that time.

A final glance showed me that I might be pulled down in moments if I did not make a stand. It also showed me a dark avalanche of dogs rushing down the hill.

I did not know the intelligence or psychology of the manticora. Most fleeing beasts will not stop to attack something which is not bothering them. Self-preservation is generally foremost in their minds. On the other hand, I was not certain that the manticora even realized that it was being pursued. It might have started out on my trail and only had its own picked up afterwards. It might have only the one thing on its mind. It was hardly a time to pause and reflect on all the possibilities.

I drew Grayswandir and turned my mount to the left, pulling back on the reins immediately as he made the turn.

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Drum screamed and rose high onto his hind legs. I felt myself sliding backwards, so I jumped to the ground and leaped to the side.

But I had, for the moment, forgotten the speed of the stormhounds, had also forgotten how easily they had once overtaken Random and myself in Flora's Mercedes, had also forgotten that unlike ordinary dogs chasing cars, they had begun tearing the vehicle apart.

Suddenly, they were all over the manticora, a dozen or more dogs, leaping and biting. The beast threw back its head and uttered another cry as they struck at it. It swept that vicious tail through them, sending one flying, stunning or killing two others. It reared then and turned, striking out with its forelegs as it descended.

But even as it did this, a hound attached itself to its left foreleg, two more were at its haunches and one had scrambled onto its back, biting at its shoulder and neck. The others were circling it now. As soon as it would go after one, the others would dart in and slash at it.

It finally caught the one on its back with its scorpion sting and disembowled the one gnawing at its leg. However, it was running blood from a double dozen wounds by then. Shortly, it became apparent that the leg was giving it trouble, both for striking purposes and for bearing its weight when it struck with the others. In the meantime, another dog had mounted its back and was tearing at its neck. It seemed to be having a more difficult time getting at this one. Another came in from its right and shredded its ear. Two more plied its haunches, and when it reared again one rushed in and tore at its belly. Their barks and growls also seemed to be confusing it somewhat, and it began striking wildly at the ever-moving gray shapes.

I had caught hold of Drum's bridle and was trying to calm him sufficiently to remount and get the hell out of there. He kept trying to rear and pull away, and it took considerable persuasion even to hold him in place.

In the meantime, the manticora let out a bitter, wailing cry. It had struck wildly at the dog on its back and driven its sting into its own shoulder. The dogs took advantage of this distraction and rushed in wherever there was an opening, snapping and tearing.

I am certain the dogs would have finished it, but at that moment the riders topped the hill and descended. There were five of them, Julian in the lead. He had on his scaled white armor and his hunting horn hung about his neck. He rode his gigantic steed Morgenstern, a beast which has always hated me. He raised the long lance that he bore and saluted with it in my direction. Then he lowered it and shouted orders to the dogs. Grudgingly, they dropped away from the prey. Even the dog on the manticora's back loosened its grip and leaped to the ground. All of them drew back as Julian couched the lance and touched his spurs to Morgenstern's sides.

The beast turned toward him, gave a final cry of defiance and leapt ahead, fangs bared. They came together, and for a moment my view was blocked by Morgen-

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stern's shoulder. Another moment, however, and I knew from the horse's behavior that the blow had been a true one.

A turning, and I saw the beast stretched out, great gouts of blood upon its breast, flowering about the dark stem of the lance.

Julian dismounted. He said something to the other riders which I did not overhear. They remained mounted. He regarded the still-twitching manticora, then looked at me and smiled. He crossed and placed his foot upon the beast, seized the lance with one hand and wrenched it from the carcass. Then he drove it into the ground and tethered Morgenstern to its shaft. He reached up and patted the horse's shoulder, looked back at me, turned and headed in my direction.

When he came up before me he said, "I wish you hadn't killed Bela."

"Bela?" I repeated.

He glanced at the sky. I followed his gaze. Neither bird was not in sight.

"He was one of my favorites."

"I am sorry," I said. "I misunderstood what was going on."

He nodded.

"All right. I've done something for you. Now you can tell me what happened after I left the palace. Did Brand make it?"

"Yes," I said, "and you're off the hook on that. He claimed Fiona stabbed him. And she was not around to question either. She departed during the night, also. It's a wonder you didn't bump into one another."

He smiled.

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"I'd have guessed as much," he said.

"Why did you flee under such suspicious circumstances?" I asked. "It made it look bad for you."

He shrugged.

"It would not be the first time I've been falsely accused, suspected. And for that matter, if intent counts for anything, I am as guilty as our little sister. I'd have done it myself if I could. In fact, I'd a blade ready the night we fetched him back. Only, I was crowded aside."

"But why?" I asked.

He laughed.

"Why? I am afraid of the bastard, that's why. For a long while, I had thought he was dead, and certainly hoped so—finally claimed by the dark powers he dealt with. How much do you really know about him, Corwin?"

"We had a long talk."

"And. . . . ?"

"He admitted that he and Bleys and Fiona had formed a plan to claim the throne. They would see Bleys crowned, but each would share the real power. They had used the forces you referred to, to assure Dad's absence. Brand said that he had attempted to win Caine to their cause, but that Caine had instead gone to you and to Eric. The three of you then formed a similar triumvirate to seize power before they could, by placing Eric on the throne."

He nodded.

"The events are in order, but the reason is not. We did not want the throne, at least not that abruptly, nor at that time. We formed our group to oppose their group, because it had to be opposed to protect the throne. At first, the most we could persuade Eric to do was to assume a Protectorship. He was afraid he would quickly turn up dead if he saw himself crowned under those conditions. Then you turned up, with your very legitimate claim. We could not afford to let you press it at that time, because Brand's crowd was threatening out-and-out war. We felt they would be less inclined to make this move if the throne were already occupied. We could not have seated you, because you would have refused to be a puppet, a role you would have had to play since the game was already in progress and you were ignorant on too many fronts. So we persuaded Eric to take the risk and be crowned. That was how it happened."

"So when I did arrive he put out my eyes and threw me in the dungeon just for laughs."

Julian turned away and looked back at the dead manticora.

"You are a fool," he finally said. "You were a tool from the very beginning. They used you to force our hand, and either way you lost. If that half-assed attack of Bleys' had somehow succeeded, you wouldn't have lasted long enough to draw a deep breath. If it failed, as it did, Bleys disappeared, as he did, leaving you with your life forfeit for attempted usurpation. You had served your purpose and you had to die. They left us small choice in the matter. By rights, we should have killed you—and you know it."

I bit my lip. There were many things I might say. But if he was

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telling something approximating the truth, he did have a point. And I did want to hear more.

"Eric," he said, "figured that your eyesight might eventually be restored—knowing the way we regenerate—given time. It was a very delicate situation. If Dad were to return, Eric could step down and justify all of his actions to anyone's satisfaction—except for killing you. That would have been too patent a move to insure his own continued reign beyond the troubles of the moment. And I will tell you frankly that he simply wanted to imprison you and forget you."

"Then whose idea was the blinding?"

He was silent again for a long while. Then he spoke very softly, almost a whisper: "Hear me out, please. It was mine, and it may have saved your life. Any action taken against you had to be tantamount to death, or their faction would have tried for the real thing. You were no longer of any use to them, but alive and about you possessed the potentiality of becoming a danger at some future time. They could have used your Trump to contact you and kill you, or they could have used it to free you in order to sacrifice you in yet another move against Eric. Blinded, however, there was no need to slay you and you were of no use for anything else they might have in mind. It saved you by taking you out of the picture for a time, and it saved us from a more egregious act which might one day be held against us. As we saw it, there was no choice. It was the only thing we could do. There could be no show of leniency either, or we might be suspected of having some use for you ourselves. The moment you assumed any such semblance of value you would have been a dead man. The most we could do was look the other way whenever Lord Rein contrived to comfort you. That was all that could be done."

"I see," I said.

"Yes," he agreed, "you saw too soon. No one had guessed you would recover your sight that quickly, nor that you would be able to escape once you did. How did you manage it?"

"Does Macy's tell Gimbel's?" I said.

"Beg pardon?"

"I said, nevermind. What do you know of Brand's imprisonment, then?"

He regarded me once more.

"All I know is that there was some sort of falling out within his group. I lack the particulars. For some reason, Bleys and Fiona were afraid to kill him and afraid to let him run loose. When we freed him from their compromise—imprisonment—Fiona was apparently more afraid of having him free."

"And you said you feared him enough to have made ready to kill him. Why now, after all this time, when all of this is history and the power has shifted again? He was weak, virtually helpless. What harm could he do now?"

He sighed.

"I do not understand the power that he possesses," he said, "but it is considerable. I know that he can travel through Shadow with his mind, that he can sit in a chair, lo-

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cate what he seeks in Shadow and then bring it to him by an act of will without moving from the chair; and he can travel through Shadow physically in a somewhat similar fashion. He lays his mind upon the place he would visit, forms a kind of mental doorway and simply steps through. For that matter, I believe he can sometimes tell what people are thinking. It is almost as if he has himself become some sort of living Trump. I know these things because I have seen him do them. Near the end, when we had him under surveillance in the palace he had eluded us once in this fashion. This was the time he traveled to the shadow Earth and had you placed in Bedlam. After his recapture, one of us remained with him at all times. We did not yet know that he could summon things through Shadow, however. When he became aware that you had escaped your confinement, he summoned a horrid beast which attacked Caine, who was then his bodyguard. Then he went to you once again. Bleys and Fiona apparently got hold of him shortly after that, before we could, and I did not see him again until that night in the library when we brought him back. I fear him because he has deadly powers which I do not understand."

"In such a case, I wonder how they managed to confine him at all?"

"Fiona has similar strengths, and I believe Bleys did also. Between the two of them, they could apparently annul most of Brand's power while they created a place where it would be inoperative."

"Not totally," I said. "He got a message to Random. In fact, he reached me once, weakly."

"Obviously not totally, then," he said. "Sufficiently, however. Until we broke through the defenses."

"What do you know of all their by-play with me—confining me, trying to kill me, saving me."

"That I do not understand," he said, "except that it was part of the power struggle within their own group. They had had a falling out amongst themselves, and one side or the other had some use for you. So, naturally, one side was trying to kill you while the other fought to preserve you. Ultimately, of course, Bleys got the most mileage out of you, in that attack he launched."

"But he was the one who tried to kill me, back on Earth," I said. "He was the one who shot out my tires."

"Oh?"

"Well, that is what Brand told me, but it jibes with all sorts of secondary evidence."

He shrugged.

"I cannot help you on that," he said. "I simply do not know what was going on among them at that time."

"Yet you countenance Fiona in Amber," I said. "In fact, you are more than a little cordial to her whenever she is about."

"Of course," he said, smiling. "I have always been very fond of Fiona. She is certainly the loveliest, most civilized of us all. Pity Dad was always so dead-set against brother-sister marriages, as well you know. It bothered me that we had to be adversaries for so long as we were. Things returned pretty much to normal after Bleys' death, your

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imprisonment and Eric's coronation, though. She accepted their defeat gracefully, and that was that. She was obviously as frightened at the prospect of Brand's return as I was."

"Brand told things differently," I said, "but then of course he would. For one thing, he claims that Bleys is still living, that he hunted him down with his Trump and knows that he is off in Shadow, training another force for another strike at Amber."

"I suppose this is possible," Julian said. "But we are more than adequately prepared, are we not?"

"He claims further that the strike will be a feint," I continued, "and that the real attack will then come direct from the Courts of Chaos, over the black road. He says that Fiona is off preparing the way for this right now."

He scowled.

"I hope he was simply lying," he said. "I would hate to see their group resurrected and at us again, this time with help from the dark direction. And I would hate to see Fiona involved."

"Brand claimed he was out of it himself, that he had seen the error of his ways—and suchlike penitent noises."

"Ha! I'd sooner trust that beast I just slew than take Brand at his word. I hope you've had the sense to keep him well-guarded—though this might not be of much avail if he has his old powers back."

"But what game could he be playing now?"

"Either he has revived the old triumvirate, a thought I like not at all, or he has a new plan all his own. But mark me, he has a plan. He has never been satisfied to be a mere spectator at anything. He is always scheming. I'd take an oath he even plots in his sleep."

"Perhaps you are right," I said. "You see, there has been a new development, whether for good or ill, I cannot yet tell. I just had a fight with Gérard. He thinks I have done Brand some mischief. This is not the case, but I was in no position to prove my innocence. I was the last person I know of to see Brand, earlier today. Gérard visited his quarters a short time ago. He says the place is broken up, there are blood smears here and there and Brand is missing. I don't know what to make of it."

"Neither do I. But I hope it means someone has done the job properly this time."

"Lord," I said, "it's tangled. I wish I had known all of these things before."

"There was never a proper time to tell you," he said, "until now. Certainly not when you were a prisoner and could still be reached, and after that you were gone for a long while. When you returned with your troops and your new weapons, I was uncertain as to your full intentions. Then things happened quickly and Brand was back again. It was too late. I had to get out to save my skin. I am strong here in Arden. Here, I can take anything he can throw at me. I have been maintaining the patrols at full battle force and awaiting word of Brand's death. I wanted to inquire of one of you whether he was still around. But I could not decide whom to ask, thinking myself still suspect

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should he have died. As soon as I did get word, though, should it prove he was still living, I was resolved to have a try at him myself. Now this . . . state of affairs . . . What are you going to do now, Corwin?"

"I am off to fetch the Jewel of Judgment from a place where I cached it in Shadow. There is a way it can be used to destroy the black road. I intend to try it."

"How can this be done?"

"That is too long a story, for a horrible thought has just occurred to me."

"What is that?"

"Brand wants the Jewel. He was asking about it, and now—This power of his to find things in Shadow and fetch them back. How good is it?"

Julian looked thoughtful.

"He is hardly omniscient, if that is what you mean. You can find anything you want in Shadow the normal way we go about it—by traveling to it. According to Fiona, he just cuts out the footwork. It is therefore *an* object, not a particular object that he summons. Besides, that Jewel is a very strange item from everything Eric told me about it. I think Brand would have to go after it in person, once he finds out where it is."

"Then I must get on with my hellride. I have to beat him to it."

"I see you are riding Drum," Julian observed. "He is a good beast, a sturdy fellow. Been through many a hellride."

"Glad to hear that," I said. "What are *you* going to do now?"

"Get in touch with someone in Amber and get up to date on everything we haven't had a chance to talk about—Benedict, probably."

"No good," I said. "You will not be able to reach him. He is off to the Courts of Chaos. Try Gérard, and convince him I am an honorable man while you are about it."

"The redheads are the only magicians in this family, but I will try. —You *did* say the Courts of Chaos?"

"Yes, but again, the time is too valuable now."

"Of course. Get you gone. We will have our leisure later—I trust."

He reached out and clasped my arm. I glanced at the manticora, at the dogs seated in a circle about it.

"Thanks, Julian. I— You are a difficult man to understand."

"Not so. I think the Corwin I hated must have died centuries ago. Ride now, man! If Brand shows up around here I'll nail his hide to a tree!"

He shouted an order to his dogs as I mounted, and they fell upon the carcass of the manitcora, lapping at its blood and tearing out huge chunks and strips of flesh. As I rode past that strange, massive, manlike face, I saw that its eyes were still open, though glazed. They were blue, and death had not robbed them of a certain preternatural innocence. Either that, or the look was death's final gift—a senseless way of passing out ironies, if it was.

I took Drum back to the trail and began my hellride.

X.

Moving along the trail at a

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gentle pace, clouds darkening the sky and Drum's whinny of memory or anticipation . . . A turn to the left, and uphill . . . The ground is brown, yellow, back to brown again . . . The trees squat down, draw apart . . . Grasses wave between them in the cool and rising breeze . . . A quick fire in the sky . . . A rumble shakes loose raindrops . . .

Steep and rocky now . . . The wind tugs at my cloak . . . Up . . . Up to where the rocks are streaked with silver and the trees have drawn their line . . . The grasses, green fires, die down in the rain . . . Up, to the craggy, sparkling, rainwashed heights, where the clouds rush and boil like a mudgorged river at floodcrest . . . The rain stings like buckshot and the wind clears its throat to sing . . . We rise and rise and the crest comes into view, like the head of a startled bull, horns guarding the trail . . . Lightnings twist about their tips, dance between them . . . The smell of ozone as we reach that place and rush on through, the rain suddenly blocked, the wind shunted away . . .

Emerging on the father side . . . There is no rain, the air is still, the sky smoothed and darkened to a proper starfilled black . . . Meteors cut and burn, cut and burn, cauterizing to afterimage scars, fading, fading . . . Moons, cast like a handful of coins . . . Three bright dimes, a dull quarter, a pair of pennies, one of them tarnished and scarred . . . Down then, that long, winding way . . . Hoofclops clear and metallic in the night air . . . Somewhere, a cat-like cough . . . A dark shape crossing a lesser moon, ragged and swift . . .

Downward . . . The land drops away at either hand . . . Darkness below . . . Moving along the top of an infinitely high, curved wall, the way itself bright with moonlight . . . The trail buckles, folds, grows transparent . . . Soon it drifts, gauzy, filamentous, stars beneath as well as above . . . Stars below on either side . . . There is no land . . . There is only the night, night and the thin, translucent . . . trail I had to try to ride, to learn how it felt, against some future use . . .

It is absolutely silent now, and the illusion of slowness attaches to every movement . . . Shortly, the trail falls away, and we move as if swimming underwater at some enormous depth, the stars bright fish . . . It is freedom, it is the power of the hellride that brings an elation, like yet unlike the recklessness that sometimes comes in battle, the boldness of a risky feat well-learned, the rush of rightness following the finding of the poem's proper word . . . It is these and the prospect itself, riding, riding, riding, from nowhere to nowhere perhaps, across and among the minerals and fires of the void, free of earth and air and water . . .

We race a great meteor, we touch upon its bulk . . . Speeding across its pitted surface, down, around, then up again . . . It stretches into a great plain, it lightens, it yellows . . .

It is sand, sand now beneath our movement . . . The stars fade out as the darkness is diluted to a morning full of sunrise . . . Swaths of

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shade ahead, desert trees within them . . . Ride for the dark . . . Crashing through . . . Bright birds burst forth, complain, resettle . . .

Among the thickening trees . . . Darker the ground, narrower the way . . . Palm fronds shrink to hand-size, barks darken . . . A twist to the right, a widening of the way . . . Our hoofs striking sparks from cobblestones . . . The lane enlarges, becomes a tree-lined street . . . Tiny row-houses flash by . . . Bright shutters, marble steps, painted screens, set back beyond flagged walks . . . Passing, a horse-drawn cart, loaded with fresh vegetables . . . Human pedestrians turning to stare . . . A small buzz of voices . . .

On . . . Passing beneath a bridge . . . Coursing the stream till it widens to river, taking it down to the sea . . .Thudding along the beach beneath a lemon sky, blue clouds studding . . . The silt, the wrack, the shells, the smooth anatomy of driftwood . . . White spray off the lime-colored sea . . .

Racing, to where the place of waters ends at a terrace . . . Mounting, each step crumbling and roaring down behind, losing its identity, joined with the boom of the surf . . Up, up to the flattopped, treegrown plain, a golden city shimmering, mirage-like, at its end . . .

The city grows, darkens beneath a shadowy umbrella, its gray towers stretch upward, glass and metal flashing light through the murk . . . The towers begin to sway . . .

The city falls in upon itself, soundlessly, as we pass . . . Towers topple, dust boils, rises, is pinked by some lower glow . . . A gentle noise, as of a snuffed candle, drifting by . . .

A dust storm, quickly falling, giving place to fog . . . Through it, the sounds of automobile horns . . . A drift, a brief lift, a break in the graywhite, pearlwhite, shifting . . . Our hoofprints on a shoulder of highway . . . To the right, endless rows of unmoving vehicles . . . Pearlwhite, graywhite, drifting again . . .

Directionless shrieks and wailings . . . Random flashes of light . . .

Rising once more . . . The fogs lower and ebb . . . Grass, grass, grass . . . Clear now the sky, and delicate blue . . . A sun racing to set . . . Birds . . . A cow in the field, chewing, staring and chewing . . .

Leaping a wooden fence to ride a country road . . . A sudden chill beyond the hill . . . The grasses are dry and snow's on the ground . . . Tin-roofed farmhouse atop a hill, curl of smoke above it . . .

On . . . The hills rise up, the sun rolls down, darkness dragged behind . . . A sprinkle of stars . . . Here a house, set far back . . . There another, long driveway wound among old trees . . . Headlights . . .

Off to the side of the road . . . Draw rein and let it pass . . .

I wiped my brow, dusted my shirtfront and sleeves. I patted Drum's neck. The oncoming vehicle slowed as it neared me, and I could see the driver staring. I gave the

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reins a gentle movement and Drum began walking. The car braked to a halt and the driver called something after me, but I kept going. Moments later, I heard him drive off.

It was country road for a time after that. I traveled at an easy pace, passing familiar landmarks, recalling other times. A few miles later and I came to another road, wider and better. I turned there, staying off on the shoulder to the right. The temperature continued to drop, but the cold air had a good clean taste to it. A sliced moon shone above the hills to my left. There were a few small clouds passing overhead, touched to the moon's quarter with a soft, dusty light. There was very little wind; an occasional stirring of branches, no more. After a time, I came to a series of dips in the road, telling me I was almost there.

A curve and a couple more dips . . . I saw the boulder beside the driveway, I read my address upon it.

I drew rein then and looked up the hill. There was a station wagon in the driveway and a light on inside the house. I guided Drum off the road and across a field into a stand of trees. I tethered him behind a pair of evergreens, rubbed his neck and told him I would not be long.

I returned to the road. No cars in sight. I crossed over and walked up the far side of the driveway, passing behind the station wagon. The only light in the house was in the living room, off to the right. I made my way around the left side of the house to the rear.

I halted when I reached the patio, looking around. Something was wrong.

The back yard was changed. A pair of decaying lawn chairs which had been leaning against a dilapidated chicken coop I had never bothered to remove, were gone. So, for that matter, was the chicken coop. They had been present the last time I had passed this way. All of the dead tree limbs which had previously been strewn about, as well as a rotting mass of them I had long ago heaped to cut for firewood, were also gone.

The compost heap was missing.

I moved to the space where it had been. All that was there was an irregular patch of bare earth of the approximate shape of the heap itself.

But I had discovered in attuning myself to the Jewel that I could make myself feel its presence. I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to do so.

Nothing.

I looked again, searching carefully, but there was no telltale glitter anywhere in sight. Not that I had really expected to see anything, not if I could not feel it nearby.

There had been no curtains in the lighted room. Studying the house now, I saw that none of the windows had curtains, shades, shutters or blinds. Therefore . . .

I passed around the other end of the house. Approaching the first lighted window, I glanced in quickly. Dropcloths covered much of the floor. A man in cap and coveralls was painting the far wall.

Of course.

I had asked Bill to sell the place,

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I had signed the necessary papers while a patient in the local clinic, when I had been projected back to my old house—probably by some action of the Jewel—on the occasion of my stabbing. That would have been several weeks ago, local time, using the Amber to shadow Earth conversion factor of approximately two and a half to one and allowing for the eight days the Courts of Chaos had cost me in Amber. Bill, of course, had gone ahead on my request. But the place had been in bad shape, abandoned as it had been for a number of years, vandalized . . . It needed some new window panes, some roofing work, new guttering, painting, sanding, buffing. And there had been a lot of trash to haul away, outside as well as inside . . .

I turned away and walked down the front slope to the road, recalling my last passage this way, half-delirious, on my hands and knees, blood leaking from my side. It had been much colder that night and there had been snow on the ground and in the air. I passed near the spot where I'd sat, trying to flag down a car with a pillow case. The memory was slightly blurred, but I still recalled the ones that had passed me by.

I crossed the road, made my way through the field to the trees. Unhitching Drum, I mounted.

"We've some more riding ahead," I told him. "Not too far this time."

We headed back to the road and started along it, continuing on past my house. If I had not told Bill to go ahead and sell the place, the compost heap would still have been there, the Jewel would still have been there. I could be on my way back to Amber with the ruddy stone hung about my neck, ready to have a try at what had to be done. Now, now I had to go looking for it, when I'd a feeling time was beginning to press once again. At least, I had a favorable ratio here with respect to its passage in Amber. I clucked at Drum and shook the reins. No sense wasting time, even so.

A half hour, and I was into town, riding down a quiet street in a residential area, houses all about me. The lights were on at Bill's place. I turned up his driveway. I left Drum in his back yard.

Alice answered my knock, stared a moment, then said, "My God! Carl!"

Minutes later, I was seated in the living room with Bill, a drink on the table to my right. Alice was out in the kitchen, having made the mistake of asking me whether I wanted something to eat.

Bill studied me as he lit his pipe.

"Your ways of coming and going still tend to be colorful," he said.

I smiled.

"Expediency is all," I said.

"That nurse at the clinic . . . Scarcely anyone believed her story."

"Scarcely anyone?"

"The minority I refer to is, of course, myself."

"What was her story?"

"She claimed that you walked to the center of the room, became two-dimensional and just faded away, like the old soldier that you are, with a rainbow-like accompaniment."

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"Glaucoma can cause the rainbow symptom. She ought to have her eyes checked."

"She did," he said. "Nothing wrong."

"Oh. Too bad. The next thing that comes to mind is neurological."

"Come on, Carl. She's all right. You know that."

I smiled and took a sip of my drink.

"And you," he said, "you look like a certain playing card I once commented on. Complete with sword. What's going on, Carl?"

"It's still complicated," I said. "Even more than the last time we talked."

"Which means you can't give me that explanation yet?"

I shook my head.

"You have won an all-expense tour of my homeland, when this is over," I said, "if I still have a homeland then. Right now, time is doing terrible things."

"What can I do to help you?"

"Information, please. My old house. Who is the guy you having fixing the place up?"

"Ed Wellen. Local contractor. You know him, I think, Didn't he put in a shower for you, or something?"

"Yes, yes he did . . . I remember."

"He's expanded quite a bit. Bought some heavy equipment. Has a number of fellows working for him now. I handled his incorporation."

"Do you know who he's got working at my place—now?"

"Offhand, no. But I can find out in just a minute." He moved his hand to rest on the telephone on the side table. "Shall I give him a ring?"

"Yes," I said, "but there is a little more to it than that. There is only one thing in which I am truly interested. There was a compost heap in the back yard. It was there the last time I passed this way. It is gone now. I have to find out what became of it."

He cocked his head to the right and grinned around his pipe.

"You serious?" he finally said.

"Sure as death," I said. "I hid something in that heap when I crawled by, decorating the snow with my precious bodily fluids. I've got to have it back now."

"Just what is it?"

"A ruby pendant."

"Priceless, I suppose."

"Your're right."

He nodded, slowly.

"If it were anyone else, I would suspect a practical joke," he said. "A treasure in a compost heap . . . Family heirloom?"

"Yes. Forty or fifty carats. Simple setting. Heavy chain."

He removed his pipe and whistled softly.

"Mind if I ask why you put it there?"

"I'd be dead now if I hadn't."

"Pretty good reason."

He reached for the phone again.

"We've had some action on the house already," he remarked. "Pretty good, since I haven't advertised yet. Fellow'd heard from someone who'd heard from someone else. I took him over this morning. He's thinking about it. We may move it pretty quick."

He began to dial.

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"Wait," I said. "Tell me about him."

He cradled the phone, looked up.

"Thin guy," he said. "Redhead. Had a beard. Said he was an artist. Wants a place in the country."

"Son of a bitch!" I said, just as Alice came into the room with a tray.

She made a *tsking* sound and smiled as she delivered it to me.

"Just a couple hamburgers and some leftover salad," she said. "Nothing to get excited about."

"Thank you. I was getting ready to eat my horse. I'd have felt bad afterwards."

"I don't imagine he'd have been too happy about it himself. Enjoy," she said, and returned to the kitchen.

"Was the compost heap still there when you took him over?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

"No," he said after a moment. "The yard was already clear."

"That's something, anyway," I said, and I began eating.

He made the call, and he talked for several minutes. I got the drift of things from his end of the conversation, but I listened to the entire thing after he had hung up, while I finished the food and washed it down with what was left in my glass.

"He hated to see good compost go to waste," Bill said. "So he pitched the heap into his pickup just the other day and took it out to his farm. He dumped it next to a plot he intends to cultivate, and he has not had a chance to spread it yet. Says he did not notice any jewelry, but then he could easily have missed it."

I nodded.

"If I can borrow a flashlight, I had better get moving."

"Sure. I will drive you out," he said.

"I do not want to be parted from my horse at this point."

"Well, you will probably want a rake, and a shovel or a pitchfork. I can drive them out and meet you there, if you know where the place is."

"I know where Ed's place is. He must have tools, though."

Bill shrugged and smiled.

"All right," I said. "Let me use your bathroom, and then we had better get moving."

"You know where it is. —By the way, you seemed as if you knew the prospective buyer."

I put the tray aside and rose.

"You heard of him last as Brandon Corey."

"The guy who pretended to be your brother and got you committed?"

" 'Pretended' hell! He is my brother. No fault of mine, though. Excuse me."

"He was there."

"Where?"

"Ed's place, this afternoon. At least a bearded redhead was."

"Doing what?"

"Said he was an artist. Said he wanted permission to set up his easel and paint in one of the fields."

"And Ed let him?"

"Of course. Thought it was a great idea. That is why he told me about it. Wanted to brag."

"Get the stuff. I will meet you there."

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"Right."

The second thing I took out in the bathroom was my Trumps. I had to reach someone in Amber soonest, someone strong enough to stop him. But who? Benedict was on his way to the Courts of Chaos, Random was off looking for his son. I had just parted with Gérard on somewhat less than amicable terms. I wished that I had a Trump for Ganelon.

I decided that I would have to try Gérard.

I drew forth his card, performed the proper mental maneuvers. Moments later, I had contact.

"Corwin!"

"Just listen, Gérard! Brand is alive, if that is any consolation. I'm damn sure of that. This is important. Life and death. You've got to do something—fast!"

His expressions had changed rapidly while I had spoken—anger, surprise, interest . . .

"Go ahead," he said.

"Brand could be coming back very soon. In fact, he may already be in Amber. You haven't seen him yet, have you?"

"No."

"He must be stopped from walking the Pattern."

"I do not understand. But I can post a guard outside the chamber of the Pattern."

"Put the guard inside the chamber. He has strange ways of coming and going now. Terrible things may happen if he walks the Pattern."

"I will watch it personally then. What is happening?"

"No time now. Here is the next thing: Is Llewella back in Rebma?"

"Yes, she is."

"Get hold of her with her Trump. She's got to warn Moire that the Pattern in Rebma has to be guarded also."

"How serious is this, Corwin?"

"It could be the end of everything," I said. "I have to go now."

I broke the contact and headed for the kitchen and the back door, stopping only long enough to thank Alice and say good night. If Brand got hold of the Jewel and attuned himself to it, I was not certain what he would do, but I had a pretty strong hunch.

I mounted Drum and turned him toward the road. Bill was already backing out of the driveway.

XI.

I cut through fields in many places where Bill had to follow the roads, so I was not all that far behind him. When I drew up, he was talking with Ed, who was gesturing toward the southwest.

As I dismounted, Ed was studying Drum.

"Nice horse, that," he said.

"Thanks."

"You've been away."

"Yes."

We shook hands.

"Good to see you again. I was just telling Bill that I don't really know how long that artist stayed around. I just figured he would go away when it got dark, and I didn't pay too much attention. Now, if he was really looking for something of yours and knew about the compost heap, he could still be out there for all I know. I'll get my shotgun, if you like, and go with you."

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"No," I said, "thanks. I think I know who it was. The gun will not be necessary. We'll just walk over and do a little poking around."

"Okay," he said. "Let me come along and give you a hand."

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"How about your horse, then? What say I give him a drink and something to eat, clean him up a bit?"

"I'm sure he'd be grateful. I know I would."

"What's his name?"

"Drum."

He approached Drum and began making friends with him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll be back in the barn for awhile. If you need me for anything, just holler."

"Thanks."

I got the tools out of Bill's car and he carried the electric lantern, leading me off to the southwest where Ed had been pointing earlier.

As we crossed the field, I followed the beam of Bill's light, searching for the heap. When I saw what might be the remains of one, I drew a deep breath, involuntarily. Someone must have been at it, the way the clods were strewn about. The mass would not have been dumped from a truck to fall in such a dispersed fashion.

Still . . . The fact that someone had looked did not mean he had located what he had been seeking.

"What do you think?" Bill said.

"I don't know," I told him, lowering the tools to the ground and approaching the largest aggregate in sight. "Give me some light here."

I scanned what remained of the heap, then fetched a rake and began taking it apart. I broke each clod and spread it upon the ground, running the tines through it. After a time, Bill set the lantern at a good angle and moved to help me.

"I've got a funny feeling . . ." he said.

"So do I."

". . . . That we may be too late."

We kept at it, pulverizing and spreading, pulverizing and spreading . . .

I felt the tingle of a familiar presence. I straightened and waited. Contact came moments later.

"Corwin!"

"Here, Gérard."

"What'd you say?" said Bill.

I raised my hand to silence him and gave my attention to Gérard. He stood in shadow at the bright beginning of the Pattern, leaning upon his great blade.

"You were right," he said. "Brand did show up here, just a moment ago. I am not sure how he got in. He stepped out of the shadows off to the left, there." He gestured. "He looked at me for a moment, then turned around and walked back. He did not answer when I hailed him. So I turned up the lantern, but he was nowhere in sight. He just disappeared. What do you want me to do now?"

"Was he wearing the Jewel of Judgment?"

"I could not tell. I only had sight of him for a moment, in this bad light."

"Are they watching the Pattern in Rebma now?"

"Yes. Llewella's alerted them."

"Good. Stay on guard, then. I will be in touch again."

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"All right. Corwin— About what happened earlier . . ."

"Forget it."

"Thanks. That Ganelon is one tough fellow."

"Indeed," I said. "Stay awake."

His image faded as I released the contact, but a strange thing happened then. The sense of contact, the path, remained with me, objectless, open, like a switched-on radio not tuned to anything.

Bill was looking at me peculiarly.

"Carl, what is happening?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute."

Suddenly, there was contact again, though not with Gérard. She must have been trying to reach me while my attention was diverted.

"Corwin, it is important . . ."

"Go ahead, Fi."

"You will not find what you are looking for there. Brand has it."

"I was beginning to suspect as much."

"We have to stop him. I do not know how much you know about these matters—"

"Neither do I anymore," I said, "but I have the Pattern in Amber and the one in Rebma under guard. Gérard just told me that Brand appeared at the one in Amber, but was scared off."

She nodded her small, fine-featured face. Her red tresses were unusually disarrayed. She looked tired.

"I am aware of this," she said. "I have him under surveillance. But you have forgotten another possibility."

"No," I said. "According to my calculations, Tir-na Nog'th should not be attainable yet—"

"That is not what I was referring to. He is headed for the primal Pattern itself."

"To attune the Jewel?"

"The first time through," she said.

"To walk it, he would have to pass through the damaged area. I gather that is more than a little difficult."

"So you do know about it," she said. "Good. That saves time. The dark area would not trouble him the way it would another of us. He has come to terms with that darkness. We must stop him, now."

"Do you know any shortcuts to that place?"

"Yes. Come to me. I will take you there."

"Just a minute. I want Drum with me."

"What for?"

"No telling. That is why I want him."

"Very well. Then bring me through. We can as easily depart from there as from here."

I extended my hand. In a moment, I held hers. She stepped forward.

"Lord!" said Bill, drawing back. "You were giving me doubts about your sanity, Carl. Now it's mine I wonder about. She— She's on one of the cards, too, isn't she?"

"Yes. Bill, this is my sister Fiona. Fiona, this is Bill Roth, a very good friend."

Fi extended her hand and smiled, and I left them there while I went back to fetch Drum. A few minutes later, I led him forth.

"Bill," I said, "I am sorry to have wasted your time. My brother has the thing. We are going after him now. Thanks for helping me."

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I shook his hand. He said, "Corwin." I smiled.

"Yes, that is my name."

"We have been talking, your sister and I. Not much I could learn in a few minutes, but I know it is dangerous. So good luck. I still want the whole story one day."

"Thanks," I said. "I will try to see that you get it."

I mounted, leaned down and drew Fiona up before me.

"Good night, Mister Roth," she said. Then, to me, "Start riding, slowly, across the field."

I did.

"Brand says you are the one who stabbed him," I said, as soon as we had gone far enough to feel alone.

"That's right."

"Why?"

"To avoid all this."

"I talked with him for a long while. He claimed it was originally you, Bleys and himself, together in a scheme to seize power."

"That is correct."

"He told me he had approached Caine, trying to win him to your side, but that Caine would have none of it, that Caine had passed the word along to Eric and Julian. And this led to their forming their own group, to block your way to the throne."

"That is basically correct. Caine had ambitions of his own—long-term ones—but ambitions nevertheless. He was in no position to pursue them, however. So he decided that if his lot was to be a lesser one, he would rather serve it under Eric than under Bleys. I can see his point, too."

"He also claimed that the three of you had a deal going with the powers at the end of the black road, in the Courts of Chaos."

"Yes," she said, "we did."

"You use the past tense."

"For myself and for Bleys, yes."

"That is not the way Brand tells it."

"He wouldn't."

"He said you and Bleys wanted to continue exploiting that alliance, but that he had had a change of heart. Because of this, he claims you turned on him and imprisoned him in that tower."

"Why didn't we just kill him?"

"I give up. Tell me."

"He was too dangerous to be allowed his freedom, but we could not kill him either because he held something vital."

"What?"

"With Dworkin gone, Brand was the only one who knew how to undo the damage he had done to the primal Pattern."

"You had a long time to get that information out of him."

"He possesses unbelievable resources."

"Then why did you stab him?"

"I repeat, to avoid all this. If it became a question of his freedom or his death, it were better he died. We would have to take our chances on figuring the method of repairing the Pattern."

"This being the case, why did you consent to cooperate in bringing him back?"

"First, I was not cooperating, I was trying to impede the attempt. But there were too many trying too hard. You got through to him in spite of me. Second, I had to be on hand to try to kill him in the event you succeeded. Too bad things

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worked out the way they did."

"You say that you and Bleys had second thoughts about the alliance, but that Brand did not?"

"Yes."

"How did your second thoughts affect your desire for the throne?"

"We thought we could manage it without any additional outside help."

"I see."

"Do you believe me?"

"I'm afraid that I am beginning to."

"Turn here."

I entered a cleft in a hillside. The way was narrow and very dark, with only a small band of stars above us. Fiona had been manipulating Shadow while we had talked, leading us from Ed's field downward, into a misty, moor-like place, then up again, to a clear and rocky trail among mountains. Now, as we moved through the dark defile, I felt her working with Shadow again. The air was cool but not cold. The blackness to our left and our right was absolute, giving the illusion of enormous depths, rather than nearby rock cloaked in shadow. This impression was reinforced, I suddenly realized, by the fact that Drum's hoofbeats were not producing any echoes, aftersounds, overtones.

"What can I do to gain your trust?" she said.

"That's asking quite a bit."

She laughed.

"Let me rephrase it. What can I do to convince you I am telling the truth?"

"Just answer one question."

"What?"

"Who shot out my tires?"

She laughed again.

"You've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Maybe. You tell me."

"Brand," she said. "He had failed in his effort to destroy your memory, so he decided he had better do a more thorough job."

"The version I had of the story was that Bleys had done the shooting and left me in the lake, that Brand had arrived in time to drag me out and save my life. In fact, the police report seemed to indicate something to that effect."

"Who called the police?" she asked.

"They had it listed as an anonymous call, but—"

"Bleys called them. He couldn't reach you in time to save you, once he realized what was happening. He hoped that they could. Fortunately, they did."

"What do you mean?"

"Brand did not drag you out of the wreck. You did it yourself. He waited around to be certain you were dead, and you surfaced and pulled yourself ashore. He went down and was checking you over to decide whether you would die if he just left you there or whether he should throw you back in again. The police arrived about then and he had to clear out. We caught up with him shortly afterwards and were able to subdue him and imprison him in the tower. That took a lot of doing. Later, I contacted Eric and told him what had happened. He then ordered Flora to put you in the other place and see that you were held until after his coronation."

"It fits," I said. "Thanks."

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"What does it fit?"

"I was only a small-town GP in simpler times than these, and I never had much to do with psychiatric cases. But I do know that you don't give a person electroshock therapy to restore memories. EST generally does just the opposite. It destroys some of the short-term ones. My suspicions began to stir when I learned that that was what Brand had had done to me. So I came up with my own hypothesis. The auto wreck did not restore my memories, and neither did the EST. I had finally begun recovering them naturally, not as the result of any particular trauma. I must have done something or said something to indicate that this was occurring. Word of it somehow got to Brand and he decided that this would not be a good thing to have happen at that time. So he journeyed to my shadow and managed to get me committed and subjected to treatment which he hoped would wipe out those things I had recently recovered. This was just partly successful, in that its only lasting effect was to fuzz me up for the few days surrounding the sessions. The accident may have contributed, too. But when I escaped from Porter and lived through his attempt to kill me, the process of recovery continued after I regained consciousness in Greenwood and left the place. I was remembering more and more when I was staying at Flora's. The recovery was accelerated by Random's taking me to Rebma, where I walked the Pattern. If this had not occurred, however, I am convinced now that it would all have come back, anyway. It might have taken somewhat longer, but I had broken through and the remembering was an ongoing process, coming faster and faster near the end. So I concluded that Brand was trying to sabotage me, and that is what fits the things you just told me."

The band of stars had narrowed, and it finally vanished above us. We advanced through what seemed a totally black tunnel now, with perhaps the tiniest flickering of light a great distance ahead of us.

"Yes," she said in the darkness before me, "you guessed correctly. Brand was afraid of you. He claimed he had seen your return one night in Tir-na Nog'th, to the undoing of all our plans. I paid him no heed at the time, for I was not even aware you still lived. It must have been then that he set out to find you. Whether he divined our whereabouts by some arcane means or simply saw it in Eric's mind, I do not know. Probably the latter. He is occasionally capable of such a feat. However he located you, you now know the rest."

"It was Flora's presence in that place and her strange liaison with Eric that first made him suspicious. Or so he said. Not that it matters, now. What do you propose doing with him if we get our hands on him?"

She chuckled.

"You are wearing your blade," she said.

"Brand told me, not all that long ago, that Bleys is still alive. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"Then why am I here, rather than Bleys?"

"Bleys is not attuned to the

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Jewel. You are. You interact with it at near distances, and it will attempt to preserve your life if you are in imminent danger of losing it. The risk, therefore, is not as great," she said. Then, moments later, "Don't take it for granted, though. A swift stroke can still beat its reaction. You can die in its presence."

The light ahead grew larger, brighter, but there were no drafts, sounds or smells from that direction. Advancing, I thought of the layers upon layers of explanations I had received since my return, each with its own complex of motivations, justifications for what had happened while I was away, for what had happened since, for what was happening now. The emotions, the plans, the feelings, the objectives I had seen swirled like floodwater through the city of facts I was slowly erecting on the grave of my other self, and though an act is an act, in the best Steinian tradition, each wave of interpretation that broke upon me shifted the position of one or more things I had thought safely anchored, and by this brought about an alteration of the whole, to the extent that all of life seemed almost a shifting interplay of Shadow about the Amber of some never-to-be-attained truth. Still, I could not deny that I knew more now than I had several years earlier, that I was closer to the heart of matters than I had been before, that the entire action in which I had been caught up upon my return seemed now to be sweeping toward some final resolution. And what did I want? A chance to find out what was right and a chance to act on it! I laughed. Who is ever granted the first, let alone the second of these? A workable approximation of truth, then. That would be enough. —And a chance to swing my blade a few times in the right direction: The highest compensation I could receive from a one o'clock world for the changes wrought since noon. I laughed again and made sure my blade was loose in the sheath.

"Brand said that Bleys had raised another army—" I began.

"Later," she said, "later. There is no more time."

And she was right. The light had grown large, become a circular opening. It had approached at a rate out of proportion to our advance, as though the tunnel itself were contracting. It seemed to be daylight that was rushing in through what I chose to regard as the cavemouth.

"All right," I said, and moments later we reached the opening and passed through it.

I blinked my eyes as we emerged. To my left was the sea, which seemed to merge with the same-colored sky. The golden sun which floated/hung above/within it, bounced beams of brilliance from all directions. Behind me, now, there was nothing but rock. Our passage to this place had vanished without a sign. Not too far below and before me—perhaps a hundred feet distant—lay the primal Pattern. A figure was negotiating the second of its outer arcs, his attention so confined by this activity that he had apparently not yet noted our presence. A flash of red as he took a turn: the Jewel, hanging now from his neck as it had hung from mine, from Eric's, from Dad's. The figure, of course, was Brand's.

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I dismounted. I looked up at Fiona, small and distraught, and I placed Drum's reins in her hand.

"Any advice, other than to go after him?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

Turning then, I drew Grayswandir and strode forward.

"Good luck," she said softly.

As I walked toward the Pattern, I saw the long chain, leading from the cavemouth to the now still form of the griffin Wixer. Wixer's head lay on the ground several paces to the left of his body. Body and head both leaked a normal colored blood upon the stone.

As I approached the beginning of the Pattern, I did a quick calculation. Brand had already taken several turns about the general spiral of the design. He was approximately two and a half laps into it. If we were only separated by one winding, I could reach him with my blade once I achieved a position paralleling his own. The going, however, got rougher the further one penetrated the design. Consequently, Brand was moving at a steadily decreasing pace. So it would be close. I did not have to catch him. I just had to pick up a lap and a half and obtain a position across from him.

I placed my foot upon the Pattern and moved forward, as fast as I was able. The blue sparks began about my feet as I rushed through the first curve against the rising resistance. The sparks grew quickly. My hair was beginning to rise when I hit the First Veil, and the crackling of the sparks was quite audible now. I pushed on against the pressure of the Veil, wondering whether Brand had noticed me yet, unable to afford the distraction of a glance in his direction just then. I met the resistance with increased force, and several steps later I was through the Veil and moving more easily again.

I looked up. Brand was just emerging from the terrible Second Veil, blue sparks as high as his waist. He was grinning a grin of resolve and triumph as he pulled free and took a clear step forward. Then he saw me.

The grin went away and he hesitated, a point in my favor. You never stop on the Pattern if you can help it. If you do, it costs a lot of extra energy to get moving again.

"You are too late!" he called out.

"I did not answer him. I just kept moving. Blue fires fell from the Pattern tracery along Grayswandir's length.

"You will not make it through the black," he said.

I kept going. The dark area was just ahead of me now. I was glad that it had not occurred over one of the more difficult portions of the Pattern this time around. Brand moved forward and slowly began his movement toward the Grand Curve. If I could catch him there, it would be no contest. He would not have the strength or the speed to defend himself.

As I approached the damaged portion of the Pattern, I recalled the means by which Ganelon and I had cut the black road on our flight from Avalon. I had succeeded in breaking the power of the road by holding the image of the Pattern in my mind as we had gone across. Now, of course, I had the Pattern itself all around me, and the dis-

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tance was not nearly so great. While my first thought had been that Brand was simply trying to rattle me with his threat, it occurred to me that the force of the dark place might well be much stronger here at its source. As I came up to it, Grayswandir blazed with a sudden intensity which outshone its previous light. On an impulse, I touched its point to the edge of the blackness, at the place where the Pattern ended.

Grayswandir clove to the blackness and could not be raised above it. I continued forward, and my blade sliced the area before me, sliding ahead in what seemed an approximation of the original tracery. I followed. The sun seemed to darken as I trod the dark ground. I was suddenly conscious of my heartbeat, and perspiration formed on my brow. A grayish cast fell over everything. The world seemed to dim, the Pattern to fade. It seemed it would be easy to step amiss in this place, and I was not certain whether the result would be the same as a misstep within the intact portions of the Pattern. I did not want to find out.

I kept my eyes low, following the line Grayswandir was inscribing before me, the blade's blue fire now the only thing of color left to the world. Right foot, left foot . . .

Then suddenly I was out of it and Grayswandir swung free in my hand once again, the fires partly diminished, whether by contrast with the reilluminated prospect or for some other reason I did not know.

Looking about, I saw that Brand was approaching the Grand Curve. As for me, I was working my way toward the Second Veil. We would both be involved in the strenuous efforts these entailed in a few more minutes. The Grand Curve is more difficult, more prolonged than the Second Veil, however. I should be free and moving more quickly again before he worked his way through the barrier. Then I would have to cross the damaged area another time. He might be free by then, but he would be moving more slowly than I would, for he would be into the area where the going becomes even more difficult.

A steady static arose with each step that I took, and a tingling sensation permeated my entire body. The sparks rose to mid-thigh as I moved. It was like striding through a field of electric wheat. My hair was at least partly risen by then. I could feel its stirring. I glanced back once to see Fiona, still mounted, unmoving, watching.

I pressed ahead to the Second Veil.

Angles . . . Short, sharp turns . . . The force rose and rose against me, so that all of my attention, all of my strength was now occupied in striving against it. There came again that familiar sense of timelessness, as though this was all I had ever done, all that I ever would do. And will . . . A focussing of desire to such an intensity that everything else was excluded . . . Brand, Fiona, Amber, my own identity . . . The sparks rose to even greater heights as I struggled, turned, labored, each step requiring more effort than the previous one.

I pushed through. Right into the black area again.

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Reflexively, I moved Grayswandir down and ahead once more. Again, the grayness, the monochrome fog, cut by the blue of my blade opening the way before me like a surgical incision.

When I emerged into normal light, I sought Brand. He was still in the western quadrant. Struggling with the Grand Curve, about two-thirds of the way through it. If I pushed hard, I might be able to catch him just as he was coming out of it. I threw all of my strength into moving as quickly as possible.

As I made it to the north end of the Pattern and into the curve leading back, it struck me suddenly what I was about to do.

I was rushing to spill more blood upon the Pattern.

If it came to a simple choice between further damage to the Pattern and Brand's destroying it utterly, then I knew what I had to do. Yet, I felt there had to be another way. Yes . . .

I slowed my pace just a trifle. It was going to be a matter of timing. His passage was a lot rougher than mine just then, so I had an edge in that respect. My entire new strategy involved arranging our encounter at just the right point. Ironically, at that moment, I recalled Brand's concern for his rug. The problem of keeping this place clean was a lot trickier, though.

He was nearing the end of the Grand Curve, and I paced him while calculating the distance to the blackness. I had decided to let him do his bleeding over the area which had already been damaged. The only disadvantage I seemed to possess was that I would be situated to Brand's right. To minimize the benefit this would give him when we crossed blades, I would have to remain somewhat to the rear.

Brand struggled and advanced, all of his movements in slow motion. I struggled too, but not as hard. I kept the pace. I wondered as I went, about the Jewel, about the affinity we had shared since the attunement. I could feel its presence, there to my left and ahead, even though I could not see it now upon Brand's breast. Would it really act to save me across that distance should Brand gain the upper hand in our coming conflict? Feeling its presence, I could almost believe that it would. It had torn me from one assailant and found, somehow, within my mind, a traditional place of safety—my own bed—and had transported me there. Feeling it now, almost seeing the way before Brand through it, I felt some assurance that it would attempt to function on my behalf once again. Recalling Fiona's words, however, I was determined not to rely on it. Still, I considered its other functions, speculated upon my ability to operate it without contact . . .

Brand had almost completed the Grand Curve. I reached out from some level of my being and made contact with the Jewel. Laying my will upon it, I called for a storm of the red tornado variety which had destroyed Iago. I did not know whether I could control that particular phenomenon in this particular place, but I called for it nevertheless and directed it toward Brand. Nothing happened immediately, though I felt the Jewel functioning to achieve something. Brand came

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to the end, offered a final exertion and passed from the Grand Curve.

I was right there behind him.

He knew it, too—somehow. His blade was out the instant the pressure was off, he gained a couple feet faster than I thought he could, got his left foot ahead of him, turned his body and met my gaze over the lines of our blades.

"Damned if you didn't make it," he said, touching the tip of my blade with his own. "You would never have gotten here this soon if it weren't for the bitch on the horse, though."

"Nice way to talk about your sister," I said, feinting and watching him move to parry.

We were hampered, in that neither of us could lunge without departing the Pattern. I was further hampered in not wanting to make him bleed, yet. I faked a stop thrust and he drew back, sliding his left foot along the design to his rear. He withdrew his right then, stamped it and tried a head cut without preliminaries. Damn it! I parried and then riposted by pure reflex. I did not want to catch him with the chest cut I had thrown back at him, but the tip of Grayswandir traced an arc beneath his sternum. I heard a humming in the air above us. I could not afford to take my eyes off Brand, though. He glanced downward and backed some more. Good. A red line now decorated his shirtfront where my cut had taken him. So far, the material seemed to be absorbing it. I stamped, feinted, thrust, parried, stop thrust, bound and unbound—everything I could think of to keep him retreating. I had the psychological edge on him in that I had the greater reach and we both knew I could do more things with it, more quickly. Brand was nearing the dark area. Just a few more paces . . .

I heard a sound like a single bell chime, followed by a great roaring. A shadow suddenly fell upon us, as though a cloud had just occluded the sun.

Brand glanced up. I think I could have gotten him just then, but he was still a couple feet too far from the target area.

He recovered immediately and glared at me.

"Damn you, Corwin! That's yours, isn't it?" he cried, and then he attacked, discarding what caution he still possessed.

Unfortunately, I was in a bad position, as I had been edging up on him, preparing to press him the rest of the way back. I was exposed and slightly off-balance. Even as I parried, I realized it would not be sufficient, and I twisted and fell back.

I struggled to keep my feet in place as I went down. I caught myself with my right elbow and my left hand. I cursed, as the pain was too much and my elbow slid to the side, dropping me to my right shoulder.

But Brand's thrust had gone by me, and within blue haloes my feet still touched the line. I was out of Brand's reach for a death-thrust, though he could still hamstring me.

I raised my right arm, still clutching Grayswandir, before me. I began to sit up. As I did, I saw that the red formation, yellow about the edges, was now spinning directly above Brand, crackling with sparks

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and small lightnings, its roar now changed to a wailing.

Brand took hold of his blade by the *forte* and raised it above his shoulder like a spear, pointed in my direction.

I knew that I could not parry it, that I could not dodge it.

With my mind, I reached out to the Jewel and up to the formation in the sky . . .

There came a bright flash as a small finger of lightning reached down and touched his blade . . .

The weapon fell from his hand and his hand flew to his mouth. With his left hand, he clutched at the Jewel of Judgment, as if he realized what I was doing and sought to nullify it by covering the stone. Sucking his fingers, he looked upward, all of the anger draining from his face to be replaced by a look of fear verging on terror. The cone was beginning to descend.

Turning then, he stepped onto the blackened area, faced south, raised both his arms and cried out something I could not hear above the wailing.

The cone fell toward him, but he seemed to grow two-dimensional as it approached. His outline wavered. He began to shrink—but it did not seem a function of actual size, so much as an effect of distancing. He dwindled, dwindled, was gone, a bare instant before the cone licked across the area he had occupied.

With him went the Jewel, so that I was left with no way of controlling the thing above me. I did not know whether it was better to maintain a low profile or to resume a normal stance on the Pattern. I decided on the latter, because the whirlwind seemed to go for things which broke the normal sequence. I got back into a sitting position and edged over to the line. Then I leaned forward into a crouch, by which time the cone began to rise. The wailing retreated down the scale as it withdrew. The blue fires about my boots had subsided completely. I turned and looked to Fiona. She motioned me to get up and go on.

So I rose slowly, seeing that the vortex above me continued to dissipate as I moved. Advancing upon the area where Brand had so recently stood, I once again used Grayswandir to guide me through. The twisted remains of Brand's blade lay near the far edge of the dim place.

I wished there were some easy way out of the Pattern. It seemed pointless to complete it now. But there is no turning back once you have set foot upon it, and I was extremely leary of trying the dark route out. So I headed on toward the Grand Curve. To what place, I wondered, had Brand taken himself? If I knew, I could command the Pattern to send me after him, once I reached the center. Perhaps Fiona had an idea. Still, he would probably head for a place where he had allies. It would be senseless to pursue him alone.

At least I had stopped the attunement, I consoled myself.

Then I entered the Grand Curve. The sparks shot up about me.

TO BE CONTINUED

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SCIENCE FACT

JERRY POURNELLE Ph. D.

A STEP FARTHER OUT

LASERS, GRASERS, AND MARXISTS

As I WRITE THIS there is confusion about just what happened in the Soviet Union last summer and fall. According to one report the Soviets have developed a powerful laser system capable of blinding our infra-red detection satellites; according to another there was a large gas fire in Siberia and everyone got excited over nothing.

No matter. Whatever happened in 1975 there is no secret that the United States and the USSR are engaged in a technological race to develop large laser weapons. The death rays of 1930's science fiction are coming, and someone will develop them. Let's take the opportunity to look at lasers, grasers, nasers, masers, and such other devices.

First, all these gadgets have one thing in common. They produce coherent radiation through stimulated emission. That sounds elementary to about half my readers, and incomprehensible to the rest, so at the risk of boring some of you (we know of at least one Nobel prizewinner who regularly reads *Galaxy*) I'd better explain.

Imagine a mob leaving a football stadium after a game. You could say that the stadium is radiating people. They walk at different speeds with different lengths of stride, and they go in different di-

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rections. Their motion is outward from the stadium, but otherwise unpredictable: it is incoherent.

Now imagine that they all issue from the same stadium door; they march in step, each stride the same length, and they all go in the same direction. Coherent radiation is like that. It's all the same frequency (and thus if it is visible light is a very pure color); it goes in the same direction. Think of light as waves, and all the waves have their peaks and valleys at exactly the same time. The result is a very powerful beam.

This is done by stimulated emission, and that takes a bit of explaining. All electromagnetic radiation involves photons. A very small part of the electromagnetic spectrum is visible light. When the frequency gets too high, the light is no longer visible, and we call it ultra-violet. Higher frequencies yet are x-rays, gamma rays, and finally what are called cosmic rays.

Below the red end of the spectrum is, not surprisingly, infra-red, which we can detect as heat. At lower frequencies still are radio, radar, and television. In theory at least a "laser" could be built which operated in any frequency from cosmic rays down through gamma rays (grasers) through visible light (lasers), down into the infra-red (IR), through the radio frequencies (masers), and finally down to the frequencies we use to send power through wires. However, since a 60-cycle wave (which sometimes you hear as a hum if you put a cheap radio set near an electrical wire) has a wave-length something like 3200 miles long, it's unlikely that anyone will ever want to build a device to stimulate radiation at that frequency.

In practice we don't know how to build stimulated emission devices at all frequencies. One of the Navy's big problems is developing a powerful blue-green laser. Obviously such a device would be useful, because that's the frequency of light that best penetrates ocean water, and would let submarines look a long way ahead without giving off the characteristic "ping" of a sonar. There are, however, lasers at a number of visible light frequencies, masers which work the same way but in radio frequencies, and IR lasers which operate at the low edge of visibility.

They work this way: Take some atoms that have the desired characteristics. Excite an electron, so that it jumps to a higher energy state. It absorbs a photon when it does that. Now "stimulate" the atom so that the electron will jump back to the lower energy state, giving up the captured photon as it does. That photon comes out at precisely the same frequency each time. Now get a lot of those atoms to do that at the same time, confine the photons so they can't get out except when going in exactly one direction, and you've got a coherent beam. Its fre-

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quency will depend on the kind of atoms you've excited.

Note what we've done. We haven't created any energy. Instead, we've put in energy and got it out again. Since no process is 100% efficient, we've lost some of our input. On the other hand, the energy we put in wasn't coherent, and the output was.

The energy input process is called "pumping". The first lasers, and many of those for sale commercially, are pumped by light. There are, however, a number of other ways to pump a laser. You can use electro-magnetic energy by surrounding the laser device with coils of wire and putting juice through them. You can also pump the laser directly through nuclear radiation, and we'll come back to that. If you want a portable laser, you might also come up with a mirror system that gathers sunlight, focusses it into your device, and converts it to laser energy. That's not too useful for military weapons unless by agreement you won't fight in the shade, but it could be a valuable technique.

However you pump the laser, and whatever the frequency you're using, the result is a beam each of whose elements is exactly (well, almost exactly) parallel. One space-tracking system sends out a beam that hasn't fanned to more than a few meters at satellite altitudes. Thus you've concentrated a lot of energy into a very narrow beam, and that is why all the military interest.

Of course there are a number of other applications that have nothing to do with war and destruction. Laser beams bouncing off the reflector Neil Armstrong left at Tranquility measure the Earth-Moon distance within fractions of a centimeter, and *that* allows tests of great importance to cosmologists—one cosmological theory says that the universal constant of gravitation (G) isn't constant at all, but changes with time. Since the masses of Earth and Moon don't change much, a good test of whether or not G is changing is just how stable that Earth-Moon distance is. Incidentally, the last I heard the experimental results indicate that G is not changing, but stay tuned; there's just enough error in the observations to let a few cosmologists hang onto the G-is-changing theory. Most, however, seem to have given it up.

We've all heard about some other civilian uses for lasers, such as communication, surveying instruments that need no flag-man and are a thousand times more accurate than the old transit-target-and-chain system, satellite tracking devices, laser surgery to burn out just the cells the physician wants killed without harming those on either side (and yes, lasers can be focussed *that* small), and all the rest. Lasers are one major reason for retiring the slide rule: laser accuracies allow manufacture of the electronic chips

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that are the heart of pocket computers. (It seems unfair, since the laser's inventor was a slide-rule addict, but there's nothing to be done about it. Dietzgen has gone out of the slide-rule business, and there you are. Progress.)

* * *

So. We have a source of narrowly focussed energy. Obviously, if we can get enough energy focussed into a narrow enough beam, we have a death ray. Add more and we have a disintegrator. The military advantages are enormous. No longer is there a time-of-flight problem. For all practical purposes your shot hits the instant it is fired, which means you don't need to track the target, whether it's a tank or an ICBM; just locate it, and zap!, it's dead. Also, you've launched nothing, and you can refire your weapon as fast as you can pump up its atoms. You haven't contaminated your defense environment by blowing off chemical or atomic weapons and thus producing smoke or ionization or something else you can't see through.

It shouldn't be any surprise that military people sponsor a very great deal of laser research. Most of it is secret and it takes a lot of digging to find out how well they're doing, but from hints that turn up here and there, laser weapons are doing quite well. A few years ago there were rumors that lasers were used to knock fist-sized holes in Army tanks at about a hundred feet. A year ago last fall I was told by a usually reliable source that the airplane-eating laser was proved out to be practical. Now we have the rumors of the Soviet laser blinding our IR satellites. Even if it didn't happen, it wouldn't be too surprising.

As I write this there aren't too many details known. According to *Aviation Week* (*AW*) a publication not generally known for being wrong, on several occasions the US IR-watching satellites were suddenly blinded by a very great deal of IR-frequency energy coming into their receptors. That could happen in several ways. One, there was just a lot of IR coming up out of the Soviet Union. A *very* large fire, for example, would do it. Another way would be for a smaller amount of IR to be focussed exactly onto our satellite. Nothing could do that but a laser.

Again according to *AW*, when this first happened US weather satellites were called on to show us the fire in Siberia. They hadn't seen one. USAF also launched one of their lower-altitude spy satellites (I don't know what they're called nowadays; they used to be called SAMOS, and there was a SAMOS project listed in the Pentagon phone book, but if you dialled the number someone answered "Weather Observation") and *it* didn't find any fire. The *AW* article stirred up a

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fuss (''panic'' was one of the milder words used to describe reactions in the aerospace industry) and there was subsequently a Department of Defense statement to the effect that nothing had happened, and someone else reported that it was all a big false alarm over a natural gas fire in Siberia, and if you take DOD's word for everything they tell you—you do, don't you?—then that's all there is to the story.

If you have an abnormal distrust in DOD flacks, you might react as did a USAF general officer friend, who pointed out that the early warning satellites—they're supposed to watch for the IR flare of Soviet rockets, including ICBM's—are at synchronous altitude, and if you can shine enough energy on them at *that* altitude you're a long way toward burning holes into something at, say, ICBM re-entry altitudes. At that point the hackles start rising on the back of your neck, or they do on mine, and if you're not scared, maybe you'd better rethink the problem.

And here I've got to say a few words about politics, and I hope I don't lose too much of my readership.

* * *

In this era of ''overkill'', surely no one but a madman would risk nuclear war. One hears that said until it becomes a part of one's mental furniture. Unfortunately, it isn't true.

One need not be mad to begin nuclear war. One may quite rationally do it. Perhaps ''rational'' is the wrong word. Perhaps I should say ''logically'' instead. It all depends on whether or not you regard Marxism as ''rational''. Certainly good Marxists do, and in fact every Soviet university student is required to take some forty semester-hours of courses in the subject; and one of the tenets of Marxism is not only that it is rational, but that it is the *only* rational political philosophy.

Marxism claims to be an objective science of history with predictive powers. Like Hari Seldon's Plan in the old Asimov *Foundation* series, Marxism doesn't pretend to be exact. Variations are possible, and even errors are possible; but Marxism is, say the Marxists, the *only* objective science of history, and in its broad predictions it is infallible. Marxism rejects any religiously-derived values and ethics and goals for the human race; Marxists have only one source of ethical values: to further progress, which is defined as moving toward the ultimate social order, namely the classless society. That which brings us nearer that goal is progressive and good. That which puts off man's final state is regressive, reactionary, and evil. No individual person is important, and indeed concern for individuals in preference to the ultimate historical goal is mere bourgeois sentimentality.

This most emphatically does not

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mean that Marxists are villains or that they do not love their families and friends; only that to allow love for friends or families to stand in the way of progress is, by definition, regressive, reactionary, bourgeois, and condemnable. Therefore no Marxist could in conscience refuse to start World War III so long as he could be certain that (1) the human race would survive it, and (2) the outcome would be the world revolution and the triumph of socialism. It is as if a convinced Christian were truly to believe that he could only bring about the Second Coming by starting Armageddon.

Now naturally no one is going to start WW III on a suspicion, a rumor, or sloppy calculations. One precept of the Leninist branch of Marxism (one which I suspect Karl Marx would condemn, but I may be wrong) is "Do not endanger the homeland of Socialism." This allows Marxists to be good Russian patriots, and certainly tempers reckless adventurism. However, it is not required for *all* of the Soviet Union to survive WW III, so long as enough lives through to bring the Revolution and its attendent benefits to all mankind. What is enough might in theory be a scientific question (to Marxists all social problems are scientific questions) but in the real world any decision is likely to be affected by the normal sentiments of mankind, or at least one sincerely hopes so. Note, though, that such influence is intellectually condemned, and that the more educated the Soviet citizen, the more intellectual training in Marxism he has enjoyed.

So. Have we demonstrated that it would be rational to begin WW III provided only that the military authorities could assure the Presidium that (1) the Soviets would survive, and (2) there would be no effective opposition to communism throughout the world; and that this is entirely independent of the level of casualties the Soviet Union and the rest of the world might sustain? Now I am not insane enough to think that most Soviet citizens, or even most Party members, think that way; but they are *supposed* to think that way, they teach their university students to think that way, and some of them talk as if they really think that way; and there is no intellectually acceptable argument within the confines of Marxism to refute the proposition.

Thus, what happens if one morning the Marshal of the Soviet Union reports that "If the war begins tomorrow, we will lose 40% of our population. We will retain at least 50% of our industry. The Red Army will occupy all of Europe to the Atlantic coast within 3 weeks. The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand will effectively cease to exist and certainly will have no military power whatever. China will be neutralized and if it becomes necessary will be re-

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duced to the stone age. What are your orders?"

In my judgment that would not be a safe world to live in because *someone* in the Presidium might well find it tempting—and would the others have effective arguments? Be powerful enough to halt the truly convinced Marxists? It seems to me a bad gamble, and far better for all of us that we never give the Suslov's of this world such a temptation.

* * *

Nonsense. Idiocy. Etc. Pournelle has finally gone off his rocker, and probably was deranged all the time. In the first place, no one could imagine keeping national power after losing 40% of their population.

But they took losses of over 30% in WW II and emerged infinitely more powerful when the war ended than when it began.

Even so. There's no way to hold casualties that low. The US has millions and millions of megatons and everybody knows that WW III would end civilization and indeed very nearly exterminate mankind; certainly it would end that techological civilization that you, Pournelle, are so proud of and from which you expect such great things.

I wish I believed that. Unfortunately I know better. There is a way to fight strategic nuclear war. There is a war plan that will neutralize most of those US weapons. I'm giving away no secrets by describing it.

First, suppose we get rid of the airplanes, or at least don't replace the poor old B-52's which were, after all, designed in the post-WW era and were built in the 50's. Second, note that of our missile subs, many are in harbor at any given time, and can't get out on less than a couple hours' notice. Scratch half the sub force, killed in harbor.

Next, imagine that the Soviets have many more subs than we do (and in fact according to *Jane's* they do) and that they routinely send them out to follow our misslie boats around (as, I am told, they now do). Scratch more of the sub fleet. If we're lucky maybe ten subs will get off their birds. That's about 150 missiles; not an impossible number to intercept if you've got laser weapons. We'll come back to that in a moment.

But there are all those Minuteman and Titan missiles. Yes: 1052 in all, 52 Titan and 1000 Minuteman. All land based. All in locations mapped precisely down to the last inch. (I could obtain such maps with a few hundred dollars and a summer of work, and if I could we may be sure the Soviets have done it.) The land-based missiles can be dealt with.

The technique is called pin-down, and it works this way. First, blind the IR satellites, so that the first indication that anything is coming out of the Soviet Union is from

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B-Mews at Fairbanks, Gander, Thule, etc. If you want to be really sneaky fire the first shots from submarines. In any event with MIRV's (Multiple Independently-targeted Re-entry Vehicles) you need only one bird to drop a warhead at each Minuteman and Titan complex. Explode the warheads at optimum burst height.

Repeat every five minutes. One warhead explodes over each missiles farm.

I don't know the exact time of powered flight for Minuteman but it's easy to show that it has to be more than four minutes, and Titan has about the same rise time. The birds are very vulnerable during boost-phase. It doesn't take a lot of disturbance to knock them *way* off course—after all, a tiny nudge at this end is miles and miles after intercontinental flight. Not one of those birds is going to hit its designated target.

Meanwhile, behind that train of one-every-four-minutes pindown missiles there comes a wave of ICBM's which will finish the job.

Insanity? Yes, in the sense that it's hard to imagine sane people doing it. No, in that it makes perfect sense if you believe the only destiny of man is to achieve the classless society, and the United States is the only obstacle in the way of eternal peace and happiness for all.

What evidence have we that anyone might do this? Only that when the US decided we had "enough"—that is, had achieved nuclear sufficiency—we stopped building birds. We haven't put a new missile into a silo in a decade. It was thought that one reason for "international tension" was that the Soviets felt strategically inferior to us. They were nervous because *we* might be contemplating preventive or pre-emptive war. All that would vanish when they achieved parity. Therefore, we stop building strategic weapons and let them catch up.

They caught up.

They kept going. They've got a *lot* more birds than we do, and as best I can tell, they're building them still. What for? It's a costly effort and of no rational value—unless you define rational as I just have.

* * *

So now what? Should the US spend a great deal more money on nuclear weapons? Increase our over-kill capability? (Note that if you assume you'll lose part of your force because you intend to let the other guy attack first, you *need* "overkill" in order to have "sufficiency". Note also that the Soviets have long since gone past us in "overkill" capacity, and are still pouring concrete and filling silos with birds.)

I won't pretend to knowledge of optimum strategic mix. I'm far out

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of date and intend to stay that way—I don't want a clearance. I'd rather be able to say what I want without worry. It's certainly possible that we need some new strategic offense weapons, and to update those we have.

I do, however, have strong feelings about concentrating *entirely* on offensive weapons. Air Force generals have long downgraded strategic defense. Air war strategists are taught "nobody ever won a war by protecting himself" and similar maxims. Defensive weapons are no doubt a fine thing, but mostly they suck up scarce defense funds that should be going into weapons we can use to knock out the other guy before he can do any harm to our people. Given a good enough strategic offense, we won't *need* defensive weapons because either we will have deterred the other guy so he doesn't start the war in the first place, or he will be knocked out quickly and effectively if he does. So say a number of generals. I have never agreed.

I don't agree now. I believe a *defensive* arms race makes enormous sense. Yes, and I supported the now-discontinued ABM system, too, even though I knew full well that Spartan wasn't likely to be worth a hoot in hell.

Why?

Well, because the really expensive technology and the really tricky problems of ABM have nothing to do with Spartan. Don't get me wrong. The kill mechanism is the key problem to effective anti-ICBM weapons. Until you have something that will deliver lethality you can't shoot down ICBM's. On the other hand, even if you have a marvelous kill mechanism, you can't use it unless you can detect and locate your target.

That was the expensive part of our now-defunct ABM system. Detection and tracking. Hardened radars. Phased-array radars, which look like solid concrete barns, have been known in theory for a long time, but in practice they're hideously complex. They work this way.

In the old-fashioned radar the antenna moved. A big dish was steered mechanically, and your tracking computer "knew" where the dish was pointed at the time it received the blip returned from the target. The antenna was vulnerable to enemy weapons—even chemical weapons, sabotage, and small-arms fire—and the mechanical parts caused terrible errors unacceptable at thousand-mile ranges.

Phased-array radars have thousands of small antennae buried in a lump of concrete: Nothing moves. Instead the various antenna elements are excited in a precise computer-controlled sequence and the returns monitored by computer. The whole thing is expensive in money, and a few years ago expensive in terms of needed research to get it working.

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We got that much out of our dead ABM. Presumably we have the antennae and computers, and need only a kill mechanism.

The laser is the obvious answer to that. What kind I leave to the experts. The theoretically best would be x-ray or gamma-ray (graser) frequencies since those would penetrate atmosphere best and deliver the greatest lethality per beam cross-section. Missile-killing lasers are likely to be large, very large, and we need a great deal of work on them.

They may need a new form of pumping. We have now a few nuclear-energy pumped lasers—that is, a small unshielded reactor pours neutrons and other high-energy nuclear particles directly into the laser, which transforms their energy into useful coherent radiation. (It is even proposed for the future that nuclear-pumped lasers be put into orbit to light cities at night and keep streets warm in winter. Possible but I'd think unlikely.)

Certainly the efficiency of lasers needs work. When you pump enough energy in to kill missiles at great distances, you'd best not waste much in your laser lest you melt your own system. Methods of steering the mirrors must be developed.

None of this, though, looks all that difficult. There was a time when really big lasers were "theoretically impossible" but them days is gone forever. *Somebody's* going to do it. And we will be in a new military era.

There are also enormous civilian benefits. Really big lasers can put mass into orbit, cutting down on the costs of entering the Third Industrial Revolution. (See this column in the two previous issues of *Galaxy* for more on that.) I do want to emphasize, though, that I'm not arguing for laser development as ABM merely as a sneaky way to get space industries.

No. Big lasers, coupled with already developed phased-array radar technology, will yield an ABM system capable of handling a few hundred incoming missiles. It may be chauvinistic of me, but I'd rather we had that capability and the Soviets didn't.

That's highly unlikely—especially so if what our IR satellites saw was *not* a Siberian gas fire—so I'll settle for both of us having the ABM. Strategically that would make the pin-down attack impossible, and any first-strike war plan hideously complex. I've discussed the probable diplomatic consequences in an earlier column. The resulting bipolar world has its problems, but it's one we could live in.

What I really wouldn't like to see is too much temptation put in the way of the Party Theoreticians over there. Maybe it isn't likely—reverently, I hope to God it isn't likely—but might they believe what they've been teaching the last forty years? ★

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WIND MUSIC

Diana King

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Democracy is the perfect system—in its place.

On Spindrift the wind is everything. It bears moisture from the seas to the thirsty land, and in certain seasons, carries the thoughts of the people. As the prow of a ship forces spray, so the planet's winds, influenced by the two parent moons, drive its inhabitants. It seldom rains on Spindrift. . .

THE DAY'S SENSATIONS were comforting if unfamiliar: The rhythmic thrumming of an obelisk tree fragmented with sighs as spindrift brushed its crown of fronds. There was a purposeful whir of wings from a passing dragonfly, skimming the puddle of water outside the door for food. On the very edge of perception a human worked his nets, the feather-light touch of his awareness intruding only momentarily into the fullness of Galan's own.

It had been a good season. The tidelands teemed with life, the spindrift was gentle and dependable, even the midges were less troublesome than usual. Beyond the stand of trees that fronted the house, Galan could see fish jumping on the surface of the salt-pond. The giller's nets would be full this night.

Still, she missed her crystal mountain pond, the vivid bloodleaf at her door, the warm glint of fireblight and the purity of baby's breath nestled in the tumbled rocks of home. Here in the lowlands there were no passing ghostweeds, no mountain gibby purring on the open hearth of a quiet evening, no music in the wind. Here there was only the dull blue of fen groundsel and gray of treewort, and the ever-present waterwind. The colors of the lowlands muted and ran together in a filmy haze, which was good for the fish that lived in the salt-ponds, and for the beaded lizard eyeing her suspiciously from the corner of Jamie's graystone house; good for Jamie, who was a giller. But not for a musician, whose duty and pleasure lay above the fens and marshes, on mountainside where the wind was dry and laden with the stuff of threnodies and bagatelles.

She loved Jamie, but she felt no sense of shelter in his dwelling, nor much sympathy for the hardships of his trade. Nor could he, for his part, understand her love of the heights and the music she found there. It was, Galan knew, an imperfect match at best. The week of years they had passed in lovemaking attested to its quality, but it said nothing of their other needs. And now he had asked her, for the first time, to have a child.

More sensitive than most, Galan knew the depth of his need. She could receive as well as focus an

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emotional response; it was this talent that made her what she was, a transmitter of music to those whose sensitivity was dull and whose feelings were borne on chaotic winds, to be scattered meaninglessly over the world. She could channel those emotions, play them back to their sources organized and strengthened into chords of meaning; but it required fierce concentration, mainly to dampen her own emotions.

She felt a twinge of resentment that he had asked her now, with Trine approaching, to decide such a difficult question. But she couldn't really blame him, either. Because she was more skilled than he in controlling emotion, the giller knew of her only what she had let him know, in carefully phrased responses and gently modulated reactions. He would be appalled to feel the true extent of her denial of the life he lived, her revulsion at the thought of spending the years it would take to rear a child here, away from her own element. And a child did need the polarity of two parents; that was the custom and it was a good one. She was not prepared to flout it and knew Jamie to be even less so.

Galan must live here or he must come to her, and that he would not do. He had his own priorities, after all.

The thought, too heavy to bear, came inevitably: *Yet I must give him an answer. And if it is no, he will find another. One who'll be willing to share his portion of the world.* But even more unbearable: *Can I give up the windsong? Leave the highwind to wallow here, in mud and salt, for a month of years? No . . .*

Tired of wrangling with the hangman's choice, she got up and went into the house. At the door she hesitated, to see that all was in order before she left. Her glance lingered for a moment on the pallet in the corner, seeing more than its readiness for his use at day's end. Why should their joining be so complete, their pleasure in one another so sure, when all else was wrong? *Oh Jamie, Jamie . . .*

She shrugged away the sudden pang of need, and made herself look from the pallet to the rack of pipes, the table clear of breakfast clutter, the planked floor swept clean. Everything would be in order when she returned. She would be gone, but he would expect that. She had already stayed longer than was usual, and his proposal would need time to consider.

She placed the protective headpiece firmly on her head. Usually, she left herself open to sensations on the long path home; this time, she would pay heed to her own emotions, without interference from the outside world. Perhaps she could weave a solution from their tangled skein, one acceptable if not beautiful to them both.

But as she turned mountainward her heavy heart belied the hope.

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* * *

Candace stopped in midpath, feasting her weary eyes and wearier soul on Galan's dwelling. From her vantage point above the escarpment, on the edge of which hung the house, she could see the spring-fed pond alive with motion even though it lay sheltered from the wind. *So,* she elated, *even now, seven days before Trine, the wind has orchestral force. What a fugue it will provide!*

She hoped Galan's windmantle was strongly built so the delicate reeds of the windwall would not be buffeted meaninglessly. The thought, seemingly motile, drew the wind at her afresh. Her headpiece strained away from her close-cropped hair with such force that Candace made to save it, even though she knew it was fastened securely under her chin. The coarse brown cloth of her cloak twisted and flapped about her path-weary legs, reminding her once more of the hours they had carried her up the leeward side of the mountain, and of the days before when they were cramped in the tiny passenger space of a wheeled troika drawn by three slavering moorhounds. The journey from her own windwall atop a smaller peak to the north had been a long one. The rest of her body, too, was reminding her in various ways of the years it had served her before bringing her here, to journey's end.

This will be your last concert away from home, old woman, she told herself. *You'll not be a lissome maid again, not in this life.*

She straightened her sagging shoulders and willed her legs to move her yet a little farther, and woodenly, they complied. She went slowly down the rubbled path toward the rippled shimmer of pond and adamantine glow of roof. How many men, she wondered as she picked her way among the litter of stones, had it taken to drag the planks for that roof over moor and up mountainside? How many to fasten them there on the edge of nothingness, securely enough to withstand these many generations of windforce. A hundred? Two hundred? She couldn't guess. Even to cut the rock-hard wood of an obelisk tree took almost superhuman strength and will. She had seen the process once and never did she forget it. Sweat-streaked men with hand-axes, hacking first, and then hewing with chisels, all to wrest a single plank from the sixty-foot length of trunk. She had been fascinated by their patience, their determination surely as hard as the obelisk itself, and had remarked to her companion (a poet whose name was long forgotten), that it was almost an art-form.

She did remember his retort: "Nonsense. Art is a celebration of the natural, not the destruction of it, for whatever useful purpose. At best this is craft. But art? Hardly!"

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Candace had not pursued the notion, for the poet was speaking truth as most would see it, but still she wondered. She had been taught as he had, that the purpose of all art was to interpret and illuminate that which already existed. Nature was the ultimate reality, and discovering man's place in it was the goal of all thought and all artistic effort. There was no such activity as true creation, just as there was no such state as perfection. The closest one could come to either of these impossibles lay in discovery.

But the thought had always nagged her: *What would it be like to* create *music? Not glean it as we do from the wind, nor from the feelings borne on its wings, but make it, fashion it, ourselves . . . from ourselves . . . could it thus* generate *emotion?*

That's blasphemy, for sure . . . or trumpery. She chuckled aloud. *But a granddame of advanced years is entitled to a bit of irreverent nonsense now and again.*

"Hoa Candace! Caaandace!" The shout came clearly to her, carried on a strong updraft, then tattered away on a crosswind. She saw the slender figure of Galan round pond's edge and step pathward. *Now there's your lissome maid,* her tired old mind observed. *Look how she scrabbles up those rocks. Energy is indeed wasted on the young.* She stopped near a patch of mouse-ear, the soft furry leaves windwhipped and shredded. *So let the young expend it and save your own, old woman.*

Galan covered the remaining distance in half the time it would have taken Candace, and with gleeful huffing and whooshing, threw herself on the older woman.

"Candace! So long . . . since . . . your dear presence . . . whuff!"

"Slow down, my girl. You wouldn't want to topple an old lady from her tired feet, now would you?"

"Old lady, indeed!" Galan laughed, then stood back to look her up and down. The thin, brown-clad shoulders were trapped firmly in the young one's grip. "What's this?" she asked in measured tones. "A mourning cloak?"

Candace nodded slowly. "For William, I'm sorry to tell."

"And I to hear," the girl said softly. She folded the old woman to her, gently, then released her. "But come, you've been many days without a good meal and a soft bed, and there's both waiting below."

"Let's get to it, then," Candace said, "before you have to fetch it here."

* * *

Later they sat, the old woman and the young one, listening to the cheerful sound of the fire. A gibby had honored the house with its tawny presence and lay purring at their feet. On the hearth a jug of candleberry wine was mulling; its spicy fragrance filled the room and

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tantalized their noses. Outside, the wind whistled and moaned.

"And what of Stefan?" Candace asked. She was lying on a low pallet near the fire, sated with a supper of spoonbread and cheese.

Galan, seated on the hearth to watch over the progress of the wine, tossed her head impatiently. She did not tolerate Stefan well. "Oh, he'll be here, to be sure. But when, the wind knows, not I."

"He sent you no message, then . . . ah, well, he's young and cocksure. But he is a talented musician, right enough. Humility will come with time. Then even Stefan may be surprised at what he can do."

Galan dipped the wine into bowls, handed one to Candace. The steaming brew was heady and sweet; the old woman sighed her pleasure.

"In Stefan's case, it may take a great deal of time," Galan observed dryly, but without rancor. "Take care. It's hot as a geyser."

"And as wonderful," Candace said, sipping despite the warning. "It was worth the journey, just for this."

They drank silently for a while, wrapped in comfort and well-being. The gibby stirred and opened his great green eyes, fixing them both with an impassive gaze.

"What a fine big fellow he is," Candace said. "Will he stay long?"

"A night or two at best. His fancy is even more free than the rest of his breed." Galan reached for him, stroked the white fur under his pointed chin. "Is that not so, gibcat?" In answer, he yawned enormously and flopped his length, as great as Galan's own, sideways to give her more area.

Candace chuckled. "He's mindful of his pleasure, too, I see. Not too independent for all that, are you, gibby?"

"We humans could take a lesson from him," Galan said. "You'll never see a gibcat who'll let himself be tethered in exchange for a little stroking now and then, for all he likes his pleasure."

"I read once, I forget where, that a gibcat's name comes from the oldest times; it means 'one that's castrated,' from an attempt by our ancestors to domesticate him."

Galan looked properly horrified. "Castrate such a one as this! But surely they could see it would do no good, either to the beast or the one who'd own it."

"It may be our ancestors were lackwits," the old woman said. "Though they probably thought themselves wise enough."

The girl sat in silence for a time, considering this barbarism. Her face was bathed in firelight, giving her a mellowness beyond her years.

Candace caught herself blinking and made an effort to be wakeful. The combination of food and wine and fire was having its effect. Her body yearned for sleep, but there was much Galan needed to share,

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that was clear. Candace had been aware of the younger woman's turmoil even before she removed the protective headpiece to allow the full communication their mutual affection demanded. Speech was sufficient for business with strangers, but hardly adequate for the heart's more pressing needs.

"So," the old woman said at length, "I think I'm not the only one here wrapped in widow's weeds. Would you share your grief? Perhaps it will help me to forget my own?"

Galan fixed her eyes on the gibcat and neither her chin nor the hand that stroked the fur trembled in the least. But she was ripe for weeping; Candace could feel the tears form in her own thoughts, as poignantly as if they *were* her own. She felt a great surge of sorrow for the stricken girl, whose loneliness was terrible. *Maybe more terrible than my own,* Candace thought. *Here is the loneliness of choice. While mine . . . death gives us no choices. Could I bear my loneliness, if William were still within my reach?*

"Speak of it, why don't you," she invited. "Your heart may not be less sore for the telling, but at least it will be open. Grief should not be hoarded. There's plenty enough of it to share."

Speak Galan did, for past her intention, for she knew the older woman was tired. Yet once unlocked the emotion poured out of itself; she could not have stopped it any more than she could keep the waters of the pond from flooding the house if the penstock were to give way. In simple phrases and a complex miasma of emotions the story of the giller and his simple human request came forth; her denial of him, and the heartrending knowledge that he would seek fulfillment elsewhere; her bitterness that she'd been called upon to choose between her life and her love; her certainty that she would never find the latter as satisfying with another, nor the former as rewarding as it had been in the past.

The old woman listened and felt, giving what comfort there was and saying little. The gibcat purred and the fire died. Near dawn they slept.

* * *

Stefan arrived in five days' time, only two days before Trine. He was nervous and impatient, for which Galan and Candace made allowances. This was his first major effort as a musician, for Trine coincided with perigee only once in seven years. Faeder and Modor, the two big moons, and Kind, the tiny moonlet, exerted their full force upon the winds and tides on such occasion, with the winds rising to gale force and the emotional tenor of the people at its peak. It was said that the winds were responsible for the ability to transmit feeling and thought. That before coming to Spindrift, people had to rely solely on words.

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Deeper thinkers ascribed the effect not to the winds, but to the moons themselves, saying that the orbs were possessed of some mystic power, and that when all three were in the sky their power was combined and somehow amplified. Deeper thinkers yet believed that the power was not mystic at all, but merely some unknown physical force emanating from the orbiting bodies, but they did not speculate thus openly.

Whatever the cause—winds, moons . . . or something inherent in the people themselves invocable only by belief in some outer agency—when the three moons rode the heavens together, the effect was of full communal telepathy. The normal ability to transmit only deepest emotions became Total Awareness.

By formalizing it, madness had been averted in the early days of Spindrift's settlement. Through art, the thoughts focused on humankind rather than one's own petty concerns. Trine was traditionally a time of catharsis through the celebration of the universal; a time when the people of Spindrift knew each other with an intimacy that would have been, they thought, too painful if not for the ritual associated with its observation. For an event of such magnitude a single musician was inadequate. Candace, Galan and Stefan would perform together, a Triple Fugue, with the people determining the motif.

They would begin to arrive during the daylight hours, camping at every level up the mountain, with the earliest enjoying the highest and best positions. At dusk, when the largest of the moons glimmered wanly forth, the musicians would prepare themselves to receive; only when Modormoon, next in size, showed her penumbral shadow, would the windmantle be raised and the concert begin. On the mountain itself the moonflowers which bloomed only during the full of the parent moons would burst triumphantly open, their pungent fragrance carried aloft on the highwind along with their seed.

The next day the people would leave as quietly as they had come, but behind them would remain the offerings they had brought in payment for their experience: moor hens and mountainberries, peppercorns and truffles, lengths of midge net and blocks of dried peat, sacks of millet and rootcrop, and here and there a moss agate or geyserite, polished to glowing perfection.

It was a truly unique event, and therefore Galan and Candace were inclined to be forebearing when Stefan demanded to know if they were ready to do their parts. It was not until he insisted upon inspecting the reeds, to see for himself that the windways were in proper alignment and repair, that Galan lost control of her temper.

"And do you think, Stefan," she demanded, "that I would misknow

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my own wall? It's a perfect instrument, Trine or no, but if your nerves demand proof, inspect all you like!"

"My dear Galan," said the boy (for he was hardly more than that, Galan reminded herself forcefully), "I am aware that you have but recently come through a windstorm of your own making, but I trust it won't affect your performance as it is now affecting your temper . . . the people deserve better than that."

"I'll guard my emotions, Stefan, and leave you to yours. Just mind you don't overstep your bounds. Remember you are, for all your talent, but a beginner."

Their anger vibrated the air. Candace, having lived through many perigees and not a few Trines, sought to restore calm. "Come, come," she pleaded. "The three of us will be together when the wind roars through that wall. It will be difficult enough for each of us to stanch the inner flow of feelings, the better to feel the larger flow from without; this turmoil amongst ourselves won't be of any help in the task."

Galan's anger abated in the face of the old woman's appeal. But Stefan still radiated resentment. *His heart burns with jealousy,* the old woman observed, *for what he feels Galan has that he is more deserving of. Compared to the mountain beneath our feet, Stefan's is little better than a hillock.*

Tossing his fair straight hair, the boy determined to have the last word: "I am glad that one of us is heart-free and hopeful of the future," he flung at them. "If I'm any reader of the winds at all, the mood this year is joyous and thankful of nature's bounty. The two of you'd be better suited to feed them back a dirge, as if they'd been inflicted with pestilence and drought."

Now it was Candace who flared. *Young scalawag. Tell me how to practice my art, will he?* Yet her voice when she spoke betrayed no emotion, and she forced the inner calm to dampen its presence in her thoughts. "You speak thoughtlessly, my young friend. Be assured that Galan and I will be as ready as your unpracticed self when the great event arrives. And as for the interpretation, it would be more professional if you'd await the presence of those people you bespoke, before you try to judge their thought." Her face wrinkled in mischief. "Besides, it may be that the people need what Galan and I have to share with them more than they need a smug reflection of themselves. Who's to say? Surely not a young musician making ready for his first Trine."

He was staring at her, aghast. "You would attempt to . . . to *influence* the music? You joke badly with me, Candace. I never did take you for a mossback, but neither did I think you a heretic. Moonstruck,

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the both of you. I'm going to the peak for solitude, to see if I can mend the hole you've made in my objectivity. I only hope your two minds are as suitably composed when I return as my *unpracticed* one!"

With that, he stomped from the house.

Candace and Galan exchanged glances, and when he was out of earshot, burst into peals of laughter.

"That pompous, insensitive . . ." Galan began, and Candace finished the thought, ". . . *rockwort*!" They tumbled to the hearthside pallets, gasping and holding their sides. A harlequin table, knocked to the floor when Galan missed her aim, spilled its contents, but in their mirth they didn't notice.

". . . Remember now, see that your mind is . . ."

"Suitably composed. Quite so!"

"Moonstruck, are we?" Candace said when their laughter had subsided. "A mooncalf himself, and telling me I'm struck!"

"Ah, well, as you said before, he's young. If we were not tolerant of youthful offense, there'd be few adults in the world."

"Truly spoken, Galan. You wear your own maturity well."

The girl sobered and threw a discomfited glance at her companion. "If only it were so. Stefan's right to this extent: my objectivity is strained at best."

"I have a premonition suitable for Trine," said the old woman. "The answer you seek will come in the fugue. Objective or no, it will be worthy of the people's consideration, too."

The girl lifted a quizzical brow. *What scheme is this dear old lady hatching?* Aloud, she inquired: "And Stefan? Will such as he appreciate this answer?"

"Perhaps not now," Candace acknowledged. "But even Stefan will someday feel the pain of personal loss."

* * *

Faedermoon's pale disc had already become visible when the last to arrive settled into the protection of the rocks. A thousand eyes were fastened upon heaven, a thousand ears filled with windsong.

Galan strained in the still-sheltered house to feel Jamie's presence on the hillside, though she knew it would be lost in the multitude who awaited Modormoon's appearance. *Perhaps then*, she thought, *when the windmantle's raised, there'll be some small indication of his presence, borne aloft with all the rest, yet separate from them . . .*

Candace interrupted the thought with a gentle admonition. "It's time, Galan. Modormoon is showing herself."

Breathing deeply, Galan willed herself to be empty of the giller, to be drained of all personal considerations and attend to the needs of

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those gathered without. Then she walked to the truss on the right, as Stefan went to the left, and together they levered the mantle away from the wall.

The exposed reeds began to vibrate, slowly at first, and then in a crescendo as the mantle was raised to its fullest height and the moon-pulled air roared through the windways. Cacophonous at the start, it was gathered slowly into tones as Stefan's mind took hold, simultaneously modulating the vibration of the reeds and stating the question that poured upward from the gathered minds. His control was firm and sure, the question that would form the basic motif for the first movement of the future strongly put. Galan had no difficulty adding the counterpoint of doubt that this was the most important question man in his ignorance could pose. She could feel Candace reinforcing her, strengthening the counterpoint against the steady throb of Stefan's opening: *Why*, the gathered minds demanded, as one, *must there be hardship, suffering, want in the midst of plenty? Why death?*

And the counterpoint? *What good to ask? Death is surely as natural as life. Is there not some other question that lies deeper in the heart?*

Candace strengthened her control, forcing the counterpoint to become the main theme. Stefan receded into background. *Why is acceptance so difficult?* Candace phrased it as a sigh, adding: *If we are born of the soil, why do we hate its call?*

Galan joined her, a series of images: *Does the moorhound question his yoke? Can a fish hate the net? Only man rails at fate.*

Stefan left off his repetition of the earlier chords, made the response borne upward from the gathered multitude: *And only man is vain. Our death feeds the soil, and it replenishes us.*

So, Galan thought, Stefan had been right. The fugue would be a celebration of death, an almost joyful affirmation of its place in nature's scheme. The doubts, the grief at the personal loss it caused, the anguish at its contemplation, all would sink into background, to become mere counterpoints to the main theme: *Death may triumph, but we, the living, reap its benefits.*

Stefan continued, the reeds parted firmly to provide forceful accompaniment to the image: *We see the parent moons, how they move apart to make way for Kind. We must take our lesson from them, and go readily to the soil, that our children will prosper.*

Galan prepared to counter softly, *And the childless? Should they think so highly of the moons' example?* She had barely chorded the phrase when Candace startled them all by introducing a stop. Overriding both of the younger musicians, she followed the brief rest with a strongly phrased command: *Consider one*

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such ill-fated soul, whose mate has gone to the soil, leaving no child behind to comfort a grieving mother. Can such a one be reconciled so easily? What of loss? Not of life, but of a loved one?

Come, feel for a heartbeat her grief at his passing . . .

Stefan was struck dumb. He was staring at the older woman incredulously, the wall totally out of his control now as the fine, sure touch of Candace manipulated it. After a moment's hesitation, Galan joined her. And finally, many heartbeats later, Stefan too joined in, providing a counterpoint of youthful optimism for their mutual and most incredibly personal lament.

More sure now that Stefan had succumbed to Candace's innovation, Galan moved to take control: *What of the unhappy lover? Come, feel the pain of separation . . .*

She had just chorded the phrase when a thought touched hers, tentatively at first, but so familiar to her that it grew quickly into his presence. Jamie! He had come after all.

With his presence so strong as to be standing beside her, the last shreds of objectivity were cast aside, and she began to tell him, in the music, of the feelings she'd kept hid. The other two musicians gave up the reeds, letting her mind range at will over the instrument set into the wall. They listened with the rest, as Galan bared her heart. But they might all have left save one, and the music would have been the same.

Together, the three finished the last movement. It would be, Galan knew, the subject of many a debate among those gathered below, but it would also be not soon forgotten; for at its end, the wind carried an ovation of tears.

* * *

"You'll go then?" Candace asked. She stood by the pond, ready to leave.

"I'll go," Galan answered. "Perhaps we'll invent a new custom, Jamie and I. A child raised a season in the father's element and a season in the mother's may be a most fortunate being. Who can know till it's tried?"

The old woman nodded. "I doubt that it matters much *where* a child is loved, only that it *is* loved. And as to custom, it's a good thing to flout now and again. Keeps the world young, and vital." She winked so wickedly that Galan had to laugh, and almost missed her question: "Has Stefan recovered?"

"Magnificently," Galan said. "His ego is already devising applications for the future."

"Ah, well, I'll leave it to you younger souls to see that he controls it. One's particular concerns should not be elevated to the level of art unless they are of truly universal interest. The traditional approach

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may be right to that extent. But neither should art become an insipid reflection of the majority.'' She cocked her head, an old elf who knew the mischief she'd done. ''When I made my personal sorrow a part of the future, did you know that you would do likewise? Or was it only impulse?''

''That,'' Galan said, ''plus the presence of Jamie in my thought. Trine brought many novelties this year, eh, Candace?''

The old woman nodded. ''And your giller? Do you know his mind as well as your own? Will he give up his lowlands each season as it turns, for all the time it will take to raise a child?''

''After hearing the music we put into the wind, how could he refuse?''

They embraced and Candace took her leave.

It may be her last concert, Galan thought as she watched the solitary figure dwindle out of sight, *but it won't be an end to her. She's brought a new kind of music to the world. No longer will an artist be content to read the message carried on the wind, when he can create his own, and make the wind carry it.*

Joyously she considered a name for the child. *Candace if it's a girl. If a boy, we'll call him Candor. A novel name perhaps, but the world'll learn to like it.*

Then she went inside to make ready for her own journey, to the lowlands where the giller waited. ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Spider Robinson

Now You See It/Him/Them. . . , Gene DeWeese & Robert Coulson, Doubleday, 157 pp., $5.95

The Starcrossed, Ben Bova, Chilton, 197 pp., $6.95

Human Machines, ed. Thomas N. Scortia & George Zebrowski, Vintage, 252 pp., $2.95

The Stardust Voyages, Stephen Tall, Berkley, 230 pp., $1.25

Soldier, Ask Not, Gordon R. Dickson, DAW, 223 pp., $1.50

Ability Quotient, Mack Reynolds, Ace, 160 pp., $1.25

Six Science Fiction Plays, ed. Roger Elwood, Pocket, 388 pp., $1.95

Space Relations, Donald Barr, Fawcett, 256 pp., $1.25

The Weird World of Gahan Wilson, Tempo, lotsa pages, $0.95

Imaginative Sex, John Norman, DAW, 269 pp., $1.95

Science Fiction Book Review Index, 1923–1973, ed. H.W. Hall, Gale Research Co., 438 pp., no price named.

Bedlam Planet, John Brunner, Ace, 159 pp., $1.25

Polymath, John Brunner, DAW, 156 pp., $1.25

"THE TROUBLE WITH AN INJOKE," B.D. Wyatt once told me, "is that, to work, it must be superfluous."

Ever hear of *Rocket To The Morgue*? It's a murder mystery the late Anthony Boucher published many moons ago (a reissue of which would be timely and a review copy of which would be appreciated), which takes place in the world of SF, and whose characters, I am told, are drawn from Heinlein and John Campbell and like that. I would *love* to read this book. I am informed that it is a fine, tight mystery as good as Boucher ever pro-

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duced (a considerable recommendation), with the added spice of the in-joke.

I *did* read, and thoroughly enjoyed (and would welcome a reissue etc.) Larry Niven and David Gerrold's *The Flying Sorcerer,* which was a carefully plotted and splendidly written novel of interstellar hilarity, one of the most consistently hilarious books I've ever read. It also took added spice from an in-joke: its alien primitives worship a pantheon of gods with SF names (Fineline the God of Engineers, T'Sturshin the God of Love. Elcin the Midget God of Thunder and Musk-watz of the Winds being entirely enough examples).

Are you getting my point? The in-joke is a splendid spice. Try to bake a cake of nutmeg sometime.

Now You See It/Him/Them . . . is a nutmeg cake. It, like *Rocket to the Morgue,* is a murder mystery, and get this, kids: the murder takes place at what the jacket copy alleges is a WorldCon (World Science Fiction Convention, Mr. Van Winkle)—although it reads more like a cross between some ghastly little regional Con and a Star Trek Sale (I refuse to call them Cons). You get brief vicarious glimpses of Gordy Dickson, Kelly Freas (mysteriously described as "white-haired") and a few other pro and fan luminaries, and the murder itself involves Mysterious ESP Powers and a Vanishing Killer. The murder victim is named Tucker, but in no way resembles the Tucker *I* have come to know and . . . er, know; nor does the sheriff named Hensley remind me overmuch of Honest Joe. The plot is dumb, the writing tired, all characters in the book are moron stereotypes—all it has going for it is the in-joke, which, since it ain't superfluous, collapses under the strain.

Then . . .

On the other hand. . . .

There's *The Starcrossed,* Ben Bova's delightful novel of gibbering madness in the 3-D TV biz, which might have been subtitled *Fear and Loathing In Toronto.*

For those few of you who won't catch the reference, Harlan Ellison once created and sold a TV series, *The Starlost,* which was taken from his tender hands, raped, beaten, ritually mutilated and left for dead on the airwaves. This end-product (and the expression may never have been more aptly-used) was so unrecognizably butchered that Harlan rightly insisted the series be credited to "Cordwainer Bird," a fictitious entity and another in-joke. You wanna hear horror stories about the scriptwriter who thought the back-up controls were what would make the starship *back up,* go talk to Harlan—or talk to Ben, who worked as "science consultant" preproduction until he discovered that they were ignoring every word he said.

Now Ben once got a terrific novelette, "When No Man Pur-

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sueth,'' out of me by having me fictionalize something that actually happened to me on a Greyhound bus. So this time he followed his own advice and wrote a thinly-disguised account of the filming of *Starlost*, set in a near-future which represents an all-too-plausible extrapolation of the decadence of the TV industry here and in Canada. It is deftly plotted, mordantly satiric, actually rib-splitting in places—and includes a character who I swear to God is Harlan to the *life*.

But please note the order: it is a good book *and* it is a lovely in-joke. Even if you are one of the dwindling minority who don't know Harlan, or one of the lucky few who missed *The Starlost*, you will almost undoubtedly enjoy *The Star-crossed*, the Catch-22 of the TV world in SF form. In a book-full of *funny* gags, the in-joke is blessedly superfluous . . . and therefore it works.

★ ★ ★

Enough on the subject of in-jokes. What else in dis paper bag? (I'm ''on vacation'' in the United Snakes this month, selling two books and a fat novella, battling entropy under the hood of my car, gulping books whenever I can, generally between enormous medicinal doses of Tullamore Dew.) A series, then, of more or less disconnected snapshots: Oh yez, *Human Machines*.

It's getting to the point where any antho with George Zebrowski's name on it goes to the top of my reading list (a dizzying height) sight unseen. This one confirms the tendency. It's not the first theme antho on cyborgs, and it won't be the last, but it's one of the best: a wide-spectrum sampling of SF speculation on cybernetic intelligence over the last 25 years, ranging from Guy Endore's ''Men of Iron'' to Jack Dann's ''I'm With You In Rockland''; from Kuttner's ''Camouflage'' to Vonnegut's ''Fortitude''; and it includes a remarkably interesting intro (almost a contradiction in terms) on The Cyborg in SF. Also represented are Damon Knight, C. L. Moore, Walter Miller Jr., ''J.J. Coupling,'' James Blish, editor Zebrowski (a ghastly story about a starship fucking itself) and co-editor Thomas N. Scortia with one of his best stories, ''Sea Change.'' It is worth noting that while these stories are individually excellent and collectively an exhaustive exploration of the cyborg concept, they are none of them the overanthologized, overfamiliar stories a hack-editor could have cheaply and quickly slapped together on the theme. C.L. Moore's stupendous ''No Woman Born,'' fifty years ahead of its time when it was printed in 1944, is alone worth the $2.95 bite. Go get it.

Okay. I've recommended the book. Now I can indulge myself in an aside. Ninety percent of the cov-

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ers on SF novels make my gorge rise, and I've only indulged myself once before; but this time I cannot be silent. You let Pournelle sound off a few months ago, Baen—now it's my turn.

You want a symbolic cover for a book of stories about human machines, living hardware, OK? So there's a frontal head shot of a guy with the top of his head unplugged, suspended by braces a good five or six inches above the rest of him, OK? Now I don't know about you, but if I am the kind of bookstore-browser who judges a book by its cover (and the publishers say we all do), I am going to be turned off to the book when I notice that the top half of the skull is designed to join with the rest *both* by a three-prong vacuum-tube-type socket *and* by a fixed position screw-band which necessitates the rotating of the skull-cap. You can't *connect* the damned thing without destroying it—screw the brain into place and you snap off two of the three prongs.

Now listen—you can't hold this against Scortia and Zebrowski. No one has less control over the cover of a book than its creator. Nor can the artist take the rap—he failed to sign his masterpiece. But someone should tell Vintage it's the little things like this that hurt.

End of indulgent aside.

* * *

Next: *The Stardust Voyages*. From the experiences of the last week, I can assure you that it shall be easier for a camel to pass through Murcheson's Eye than for a writer to sell a collection of short stories. Apparently an alarming number of you klutzes would rather read a dumb long story than a series of good short ones—or so the publishers believe (how do *you* feel about single-author collections? Why don't you drop your favorite publishers a line and let him know?). So Stephen Tall and I both used the same dodge: collect your common-background stories, put'em together, call them chapters, and you've got . . . a novel!

Despite the kiss-of-death cover-copy ("In the great tradition of STAR TREK"), Tall's book succeeds almost as well as mine—with one qualification: you must not (nay, can not) read this book in one sitting. If you do, the exegesis-of-background will by the third "chapter" become so unneccessarily redundant and repetitious (according to the Bureau of Redundancy Bureau) that you'll put the book down. The six Stardust stories were written and sold over a period of eight years, and for each the entire background and cast had to be reestablished. Unfortunately, this was so skillfully done each time that background metastasized within the body of each story, surgically inoperable (a problem I sidestepped with the Callahan's Place stories by beat-

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ing my brains out to find ten different ways to explain what Callahan's Place is).

So read the Voyages one at a time. They're good stuff, especially the 1972 Hugo Finalist "The Bear With The Knot On His Tail." But let a lot of time go by in between. Oh yeah—half of them first ran in *Galaxy*.

* * *

I've been waiting to read *Soldier, Ask Not* for a long time—I've been a fan of Gordy Dickson's Dorsai stories for nearly as long as Jerry Pournelle. I was able to find *Tactics of Mistake,* and Gordy graciously lent me his own only surviving copy of *Dorsai!* (which Ace had retitled "The Genetic General"—yecch), but *Soldier* eluded me for years.

I tell you, I wish it had continued to elude me.

Soldier, Ask Not has some juicy stuff in it. One third of it was published as a novella and won something called a Hugo in that category, which says something. It fills in a lot of the holes in Dorsai history, particularly in the biographies of Donal and Kensie Graeme. But it just doesn't work as a novel. Things happen—or fail to happen—just too conveniently; characters behave as the plot, rather than their selves, requires. There is a general air of contrivance, the faint sound of plot machinery clanking in the

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background, and the psychotic protagonist's last-act change of heart ("Oh *I* get it . . . I ought to be *nice*.") just rang false. What has to have happened here is a classic case of a damned good novella ruined by expansion.

Worthwhile for true Dorsai freaks, but I'd rather have seen the original novella with maybe a couple of the harder-to-locate Dorsai short stories to fill up the book—but then, the publishers feel you'd rather buy this than a story collection.

* * *

From somewhere they keep coming, lately, like some inexorable tide of sludge: quickies by Mack Reynolds. It takes a competent craftsman to keep churning them out, and it is frustrating to watch a competent craftsman wasting his time doing so. So far, each has been worse than the last, and founded on ever-shakier moral principles. This latest, *Ability Quotient,* rests on the assumption that rule by an elite is natural and advisable, provided they are a genuine elite. Who defines elite? Mack Reynolds, and for the *n*th time his "hero" is a man I wouldn't invite home to dinner. Ah, but he's got a high Ability Quotient—doubletalk for survival-proneness—and Magic Pills that turn him up to 78 RPM like Alvin the Chipmunk. His name . . . are you ready? . . . is Killer Caine. Another science-fiction superman myth, with characters right out of the cupboard and gore galore.

Mack, stop.

* * *

Six Science Fiction Plays is one of those collections you can't use the Spider Scale to rate: there's too great a disparity in the contents. To start with, its title is incorrect. It contains three plays, two teleplays and a screenplay—a *short* screenplay. As far as I can determine from the information supplied, only one has ever been produced. Do you understand what you are buying? Six pieces which failed to sell in their own medium—like buying sheet music for songs nobody wanted to record.

And yet, there are things in the book that make it worth buying. The smasher, of course, is the one that *was* produced: Harlan Ellison's Star Trek episode, "The City At The Edge of Forever." Now, this *isn't* the version that ran on TV and won the Hugo and the George Méliès Fantasy Award. This is Harlan's uncut original, the one that won the Writer's Guild Award, and it is much much better in every way, and it is printed here for the first time, and it is a rare treat. Harlan's intro is as long, and as good, as they always are. Also pleasant to read was Fritz Leiber's teleplay, "The Mechanical Bride." While a little trite in plot, it could, properly

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produced, be a real chiller. What do I know? Maybe Alfie Hitchcock or somebody already did it.

But the balance of the Stage and Screen SF is the kind of stuff that closes out of town before it opens, ancient themes given nothing to make them come alive. "Distinguished dramatist" Paul Zindel's "Let Me Hear You Whisper" was a particularly sophomoric satire on the heartlessness of scientists, and even the Real SF Writers (John Jakes, the Cogswell Twins, and Tom Reamey (?) weren't much better.

If your high-school drama class is really stuck for a play, try this—but don't plan to charge admission.

* * *

Space relations was disturbingly good. How do I go about praising a book about interstellar S&M? Well, I can tell you that it's exceptionally well-written, tastefully handled, entirely engrossing, reasonably plausible and populated by real people, I guess. Voracious aliens called *Plith* are approaching inhabited space, and scattered human planets are forming a Treaty Organization in self defense. Kossar wishes to join—but the Organization charter forbids slavery, on which Kossar's economy appears to depend. The problem is solved by what has to be the ultimate extrapolation of the masochist-hero theme—a secret agent who engages in an undercover mission involving the classic mistress-slave relationship with a Kossarian noble-woman, only to discover that he loves it.

I liked the book. It was . . . how shall I say it? . . . disquietingly enjoyable. Let's see more from Donald Barr.

* * *

Continuing our flirtation with aberration, we find . . . Gahan Wilson!

What can I say about a book of cartoons? There's this boat tootling out of the Tunnel of Love, and the couples in it are all snarling and yapping at one another, and one of the men in the foreground is grumbling, "Get the repair crew here on the double!" Or there's a three-headed man answering the phone with, "Burns, Burns & Burns; this is Burns, Burns and Burns speaking." (these days I answer my own phone with, "Enchanted Delicatessen—this is the mustard speaking.") Or there's . . .

There's an indeterminate (no page numbers) but satisfying number of Gahan Wilson cartoons, and that's all that need, or can, be said. Wilson claims to draw what he sees. Be sure and wash your brains after reading.

* * *

But while Wilson skirts the edge of madness, John Norman lurches headfirst over the edge, into *Im-*

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aginative Sex, the most clinically astounding "sex guide" of our age. It advises you to liven up your marriage by turning your wife into a slave. It presents 53 scenarios on this theme, most of them science-fictional in form or content (outtakes from Gor novels) which is why DAW sent me a copy. Norman goes out of his way to insist that he *really loves* women (specimen egalitarian sentence: "If the woman wishes a gag, she should be gagged."), and this one you should *scrub* your brains after reading. Better yet, leave it to the anthropologists of tomorrow.

Second recipient of the Galaxative Award.

* * *

Most of you can skip this next one; but if you are a researcher, an academic, a dedicated critic, or someone hard-up for a thesis, the *Science Fiction Book Review Index, 1923–1973* will be an invaluable find. It is a staggering achievement, a literal index of every review printed in an SF prozine in the last fifty years, *plus* maintstream and fanzine reviews of fantasy and SF for the last three years. It is indexed by author-of-reviewed-work, includes exhaustive directories of all prozines cited (clarifying magazine numbering errors), and has an editors' index (Doc Lowndes holds the all-time record, having edited 11 different titles, followed by Hugo Gernsback with 8). It is crammed full of eminently accessible information for which I have no use whatsoever—but if you want or need to know, say, what Alfred Bester had to say about Ted Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X,* this will at least tell you whatever it was, was said in Vol. 20 No. 1 (Jan. 1961) of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* on pages 95-6. *Then* all you need is a complete library of *F&SF* (and the 215 other magazines covered in this 438-page, oversize volume).

Now me, I'd call up Alfie and ask him.

I have no idea how much the book costs—there's no price given. But if you want it, you probably won't care. It's apparently available only from Gale Research Co., Book Tower, Detroit, Michigan 48226. Editor H.W. Hall promises to update it in annual volumes and will deal with you privately for them.

* * *

Next month I intend to devote something on the order of half a column to John Brunner, thanks to an explosion of fascinating books by and about him that arrived too late for inclusion this month—but I can't leave without telling you about the two I *did* have time to finish. As anyone will tell you, paperback distribution is the shits: if I wait until next month to review these two books, so I can tie them in with the others, they'll be gone

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from your bookstore. So by all means go out and purchase copies of *Bedlam Planet* and/or (depending on your finances) *Polymath,* while they last.

Bedlam Planet is vintage 1968 Brunner, with all the Brunner hallmarks. Characters so real they tug at your fingers as you turn the pages, situations of poignant irony, masterful plotting, a seemingly-effortless writing style just spattered with all those grace notes of insight and wit, and the innovative theme that the mind may not always be the best tool with which to face the unknown. It concerns a group of shipwrecked colonists, trying to adapt to their new home with less than half the equipment and supplies they need, and the unidentified native bacteria which prevent their bodies from metabolizing ascorbic acid; and the unique solution they are vouchsafed when a few of them become wise enough to go insane. One of those rare books that engages the brain and the heart in turns, that is to say, standard Brunner.

Polymath also concerns space-wrecked humans, who land on a mystery world after barely escaping the destruction of their home planet by nova. They ground safely, but their ship is subsequently wrecked. Products of centuries of easy-living, urban utopia-style, they nonetheless begin working toward continued survival on their new home, facing fierce predators and a savage winter. But it seems a second survivor-ship also reached this planet, and crashed up in the mountains . . . could they not provide invaluable aid and, more important, moral support? The central character is a "polymath," a multi-discipline genius with high-survival potential specially trained to help colonists survive on a strange world. Only, when the home sun blew up, he was just beginning the decades of training—and what instruction he did receive was *not* for the planet they've found. John has some trenchant observations to make about who *are* the survivor-types, and some unique insights about human behavior under crisis. A grinding adventure, with that air-reality that only Poul Anderson can do as consistently. Dammit, I *care* about Brunner's characters—and fortunately for me, he does too.

* * *

And the road again. Back to Nova Scotia—see yez next month, from my usual location between the Ashley and the chamber-pot. And my apologies to the Halifax Science Fiction Society, who have stiffly informed me that I am *not* the only fan in Nova Scotia. Come on up to Hampton some time, folks—you can have all my Perry Rhodans. I'm in the phone book under Bridgetown.

Where do they keep the Egress? ★

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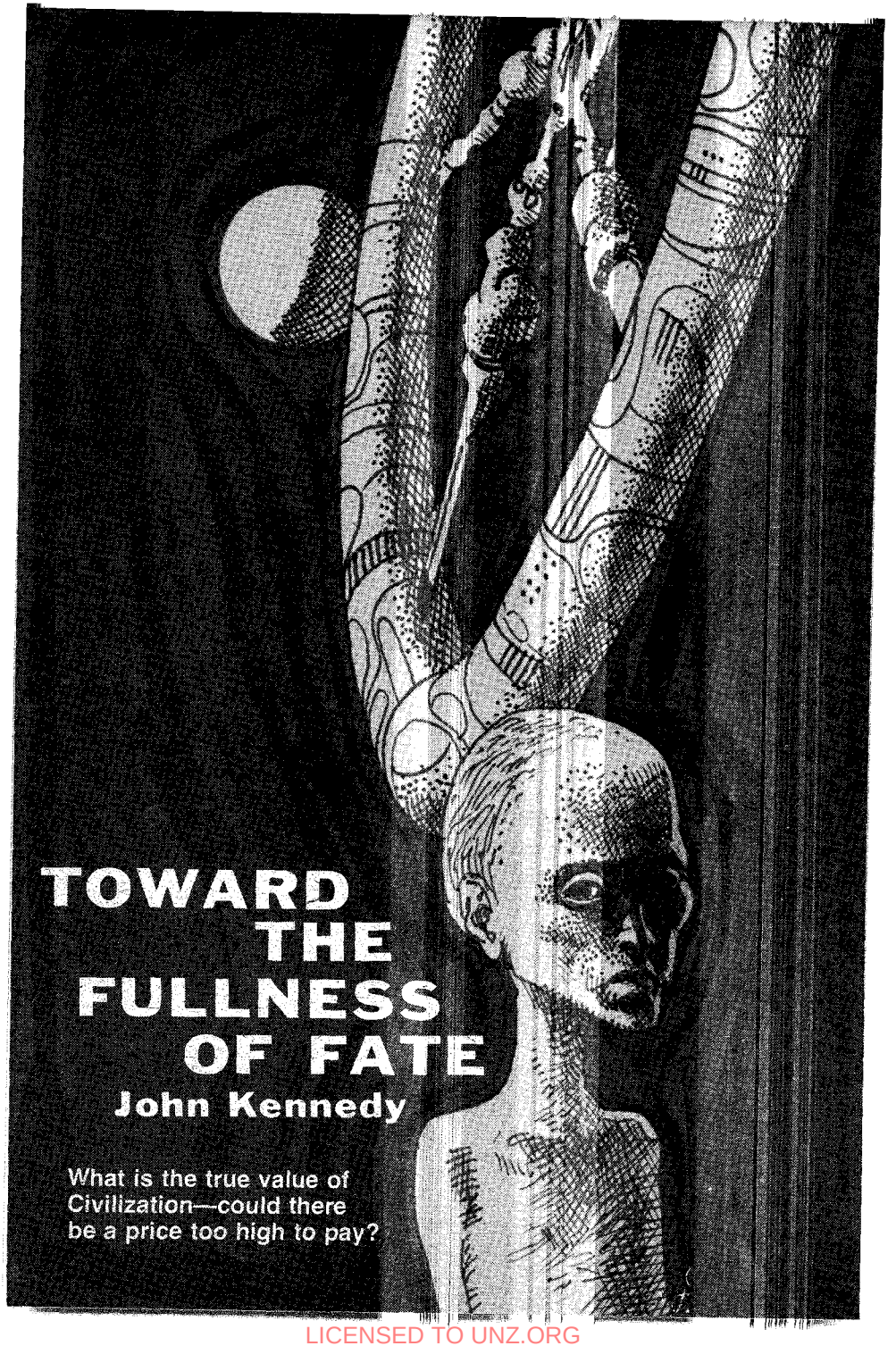

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WILL STEWART STEADIED HIMSELF against the bulkhead and peered through the small telescope that floated in front of the port. Free of any motion his muscles might have imparted to it, the scope afforded a crystal-clear view of the target area. He glanced at the monitor to his left. It showed the same view, but not as sharply. He pushed a lighted button beneath the monitor and the words MAIN SEQUENCE. . . . BEGIN RUN. . .24 AUG 93. . . 13:46:53—GMT. . .MARK. . . Lat 14 42N LONG 17 29W flashed briefly across the screen.

He returned his gaze to the telescope and stared at the smoke-shrouded ruins of Dakar. Sadly he stowed the telescope in its niche beside the port.

When Liam O'Sullivan entered the observatory he found Stewart, hands lightly braced on either side of the port, immersed in his own thoughts. Stewart's usually sharp features were softened by the reflected earthlight. The yellowish glow made the small cabin seem warmer than it actually was.

"What are you listening to?" asked O'Sullivan.

"Mozart. Symphoney number 35, in D major. Wrote it in 1780 something." Stewart hadn't moved, he still gazed at the vast dust storms on the planet's surface.

"Nice . . . Will?"

Stewart glanced over his shoulder at the other man, an inquisitive look on his face.

"What are you thinkin' so hard about?"

Stewart looked out the port again. "I was thinking about sanity, Liam."

"Whose?"

"Oh, just sanity in general." He turned from the port and looked at his friend. O'Sullivan couldn't read Stewart's expression. He was silhouetted by the port, his face in shadow. "Tell me, Liam, do you ever feel a sense of peace and . . . separateness up here?"

O'Sullivan nodded. "I suppose we all do, Will. Distance softens it," he jerked his chin toward the port, and what was beyond.

"Sometimes it just seems strange. These fantastic machines," he motioned toward the softly glowing bank of computers, "the Mozart, all of us up here in our little can of air. There's such a dichotomy between this, and that hell below. Up here cool precision, down there a chaotic holocaust."

O'Sullivan nodded slowly. The symphony had come to an end and the only sounds were those of the circulating vents and the soft clicks from the observatory tracking mechanisms.

"Hell, Will," O'Sullivan said softly, "you just can't let it get to you."

"Sometimes it's damned difficult. There are two billion people down there who're gonna be dead before the year is out."

"I know. I also know that there's

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nothing we can do about it.''

''Nothing.'' Stewart sighed deeply. ''I guess you're right. Oh, hell, I *know* you're right. It's been too late for the last six, seven years. Still, it's just so . . .'' He shrugged.

Any further conversation they might have had was interrupted by the sound of someone approaching down the companionway. The blond giant who flew into the compartment looked more like an avenging viking than the soft-spoken communications tech he really was. Sven Thorvald halted his forward flight by hooking his boot on the edge of the hatch.

''What say, old sots?'' he said with a grin.

O'Sullivan laughed. ''Typically dramatic entrance. Typically disoriented, too,'' he added, as Thorvald pulled himself into the compartment and hung in front of the other two with his feet toward the ''ceiling.''

''I've got some dramatic news, lads, so be nice.''

''I know, The People's Democratic Republic of Somewhere is about to laser us out of existance, right?''

''Not quite that dramatic, Will. But almost: you're going downside—''

''What! Will's not scheduled for downside for another month!''

''Let him talk, Liam.''

''Thank you. As I was trying to say, you're going back to earth, but first, Mack wants to see you.''

* * *

''Don't look weird at me, Will, I've got nothing to do with this,'' Col. Mack Bennett said, as Stewart entered the slot that served the station as a wardroom.

Stewart smiled, ''I didn't think you did. But I am hoping you know something about it.'' He pulled a full coffee cup from the zero-gee dispenser and looked at the station commander.

''I know a little bit; and I can guess some more. You are going to the Population Conference in Bern, Switzerland.''

''You're kidding! What for?''

''Because you're an expert on our stinking little biosphere—''

''The Conference is lousy with experts.''

''—and you have, literally, up-to-the-minute data on the world crop situation, and that's what they need.''

'' 'They,' who?''

''You report to the chief negotiator for the United States, Jefferson Prima. Know him?''

Stewart nodded. ''I met him a few years ago when he needed some satellite data interpreted for the Third Conference. I was impressed. He knows what he's doing.''

''I agree,'' said Bennett. ''They want the full *schmier*: area maps, overlays, color coded, et cetera. Make ten sets of reflection prints each of all the relevant drought and

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gamma-5 infection data for the last week. Take one print for projection—same coverage, and some background film for the last six, eight months. Now, how soon can you have the last scan in hard-copy form, ready for display?"

"An hour, maybe less. All I have to do is feed the program."

"That's fine. There's a shuttle leaving the Wheel in three hours. We can get you there in one of our tugs with time to spare. It's taking a load of European scientists to Zurich. When you get there, you'll be given a stack of stuff from Orion and Newgate so you'll have world coverage for the last week. Then you fly to Bern. Okay?"

"No problem. But why only ten hard copies? Must be a small meeting."

"I guess so. Also, it's classified."

"Huh?"

"No one outside the station is to know where you're going or what you're taking with you. It might be better if you didn't tell anyone up either, just in case."

"Now that *is* strange."

Bennett nodded and sucked some coffee into his mouth. "If anybody asks any questions you can tell them you're due some ground time and you decided to take it in Switzerland. The old tourist routine, what? Anyway, you can leave for the Wheel as soon as you get your data together."

"Okay, fine." Stewart finished his coffee and pushed himself toward and through the hatch. He was thinking about sanity again, but it was more specific this time.

* * *

Stewart arrived at the Wheel with 30 minutes to spare. The tug's pilot bid him farewell and left to supervise the vehicle's refueling and the loading of new equipment bound for the observatory.

Since the shuttle's departure was imminent, Stewart didn't leave the Hub; he had been weightless for over a month and could not have adjusted in the few minutes available. Instead he boarded the shuttle and found a seat in the spacious passenger section next to one of the small viewports. After an attractive stewardess assisted him in strapping down he promptly fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of a warning bell and a voice. "The shuttle is about to undock. All passengers must be strapped down. We will disengage five seconds after the warning bell sounds again. ETA Zurich, 46 minutes." The message was repeated in four other languages and the warning bell sounded.

Stewart felt a gentle pressure which forced him into the straps across his chest. The Wheel moved away slowly.

"Prepare for deceleration," came multilingually from the speaker, and

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Stewart was pressured firmly into his seat. As the craft's orbital velocity decreased and the Wheel receded into the void, Stuart felt a number of attitude changes nudging the giant spacecraft into the proper orientation for a re-entry. A few minutes later the shuttle was skipping along the top of the atmosphere in a series of shuddering jolts, gradually losing speed. In less than 20 minutes it had turned from space vehicle to aircraft and was rapidly approaching Europe and Switzerland. Western Europe was completely covered by clouds and Stewart spent little more time looking out the port. He had an overwhelming sense of fatigue; the return from weightlessness made even breathing an effort.

The ceiling was less than 50 feet over Zurich but the ship's computer brought them down with less than three centimeter's error. As the shuttle taxied across the huge international air/space port, Stewart looked in vain for the sight of an Alp. Rain and heavy mist shrouded the landing apron.

"Look at that!" A man on the opposite side of the aisle was pointing out his port. "There's some sort of skirmish going on." His accent was British and he wore the light-blue uniform of a United Nations Observer.

Stewart heard the muffled roar of an explosion. He quickly unstrapped his seatbelt and crossed the aisle to peer over the man's shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Over there, by those trucks," the UN man said, pointing.

They could faintly hear the angry crackle of small-arms fire. As the mist cleared momentarily, Stewart could see a number of tiny figures running in their direction from the far edge of the field. Suddenly a needle with a tail of flame left the group of men, and arched toward the shuttlecraft.

"My God," murmured the Britisher. "That's a rocket!"

It seemed to move with incredible slowness as Stewart watched, frozen. Then, inexplicably, the rocket veered from its course and impacted on the runway less than 50 meters from them. The explosion rocked the shuttle.

Momentarily blinded by the brilliant flash Stewart staggered back into the aisle. Shrill cries and a confused babble in at least four languages filled the passenger compartment. Fighting blue-white afterimages, Stewart peered out the port again.

"Here comes another one," the Britisher said. He unstrapped himself and pushed out of his seat. "Get down, everyone! In the aisle! Get away from the ports!" He dropped into the aisle and pulled Stewart after him. "This one may not miss."

There was an ear-splitting roar and Stewart was thrust painfully against the seats as the shuttle's tail swung around. The landing gear

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collapsed and the ship slid screeching across and off the runway, plowing a deep furrow in the rain-soaked grass before it came to a halt.

There was a fire somewhere in the rear of the craft and smoke was beginning to fill the passenger section. The Britisher lifted his head and looked at Stewart.

"You all right?" he asked. He wiped his hand absently across his forehead. His hand came away covered with blood from a gash over his left eye.

Stewart nodded. "I think so, how about you? You're bleeding quite a bit."

He shrugged. "Head wounds always bleed a lot, I've been told. It doesn't hurt." He stood. "I think we had better leave, don't you?"

The other passengers were, minor cuts and bruises excepted, unhurt. Most of them were milling about in the aisle when a stewardess entered the compartment. She spoke briefly with the small clusters of passengers as she moved down the aisle. When she got to Stewart and the Britisher, whom she addressed as Dr. Butler, she immediately applied a small sterile dressing to the man's wound.

"We must evacuate the shuttle, gentlemen. The tail section is afire, but we are in no immediate danger."

"What about those chaps outside with the rockets?"

"The pilot just received word that they have been captured. Now if you will go forward you will be able to exit via the number three cargo hatch." She moved down the aisle to assist the remaining people in the rear of the compartment.

"Well," said Butler, "I suppose we had best follow the young woman's advice."

Stewart nodded. He retrieved the photo-filled briefcase and his overcoat from the overhead storage compartment, and the two men followed the rest of the passengers out of the shuttle.

The rain-swept runway was crowded with emergency vehicles whose revolving lights cut blue slices out of the heavy mist. A small electric bus arrived to transport the passengers to the main terminal. After all had boarded and the bus was about to leave a small army vehicle pulled up. An army officer got out, spoke briefly with one of the shuttle's crewmen, returned to his car and left.

The crewman turned to the passengers and informed them (with the aid of a steward who spoke a couple of languages he didn't) that the army officer wanted to see if any of the passengers could identify the people who had attacked the shuttle. They were therefore proceeding to the opposite side of the field, where the survivors were being held.

Butler, who had taken a seat next to Stewart, snorted. "Lot of good this will do. They're probably members of some local terrorist

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group." He shrugged and looked at the darkening sky.

"Why do you suppose they attacked the shuttle?" Stewart asked him.

"Don't know. It's an easy target for homemade rockets—"

"Homemade?" interrupted Stewart.

Butler nodded. "They were very erratic and had a low velocity. Military rockets don't fly like that."

The only survivors of the attacking party were a pair of soaking wet teenaged girls with their hands cuffed behind them. Two other girls and five boys were lying in a row close to the perimeter fence.

Stewart stared at the bodies. Their upturned faces were so pale and quiet and young. The rain had washed most of the blood from their jagged wounds. The pools of red contrasted greatly with the green of the grass. He heard a buzzing in his ears and swayed slightly.

Butler took hold of his elbow. "Steady," he said softly. "Let's go back to the bus. You don't know any of them, do you?"

Stewart shook his head and took some slow, deep breaths. "None of them look over eighteen."

★ ★ ★

The trip to Bern took less than an hour, ground time included. Stewart spent most of that time thinking about the incident that had cost the lives of eight people. He had learned later that the stewardess who had helped him strap in when he had boarded the shuttle was among the dead.

An electric Mercedes met him at the airport and took him to the Hotel Héricourt in the center of a new convention complex north of Old Bern. The hotel was furnished entirely in Art Nouveau. Due largly to the efforts of an architect named Carelli the century-old style had undergone a European renaissance. Within a decade many of the cities of Western Europe had buildings with stark glass, granite and stainless steel exteriors and sharply contrasting, almost surrealistic interiors. Stewart was always surprised when he entered one of Carelli's buildings. He felt slightly disoriented, as if he had accidently stepped into the past through some insidious door-shaped time machine.

A room had already been reserved in Stewart's name. As the bellhop carted the luggage toward the elevators the desk clerk called to Stewart that someone was waiting for him in the hotel lounge.

The lounge was a large dark room, one wall of which was dominated by an enormous fireplace, with soft and unobtrusive music emanating from several indiscernable points. As he approached the bar, someone called his name and a hand motioned from the gloom of a plushly padded booth adjacent to the fireplace.

The figure that rose to greet

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Stewart was a familiar one. "Will, glad you could come."

"Jeff," said Stewart reaching out a hand, "how are you?"

Jefferson Prima grasped Stewart's hand in both of his. "Good, Will. Sit down. Like something to drink?" He waved to a passing waiter. After Stewart had ordered, he slumped back into the soft leather of the booth.

"You look tired, Will."

"I am. Part of it is getting acclimated to gravity again." He shrugged. "You hear about the crap in Zurich?"

Prima nodded. "That's why I wanted to catch you as soon as you got in."

"I'll admit to being flattered by the attention, but what's the rush?"

"I have reason to believe that the attack on the shuttle was for the specific purpose of destroying the information you are carrying."

Stewart's reply was interupped by the return of the waiter. He waited until the man had left. "What the hell for," he said in a low voice. "Everything in that case is or will be available through the UN info office." He shook his head, feeling exasperated. "Which reminds me," he said dryly, "I let the bellhop take all the stuff up to my room. He could be a spy, you know."

Prima grinned. "He probably is, but he was watched, and your room is guarded." He held up a hand to forestall any comment. "Listen, Will. I know all this sounds terribly melodramatic, but it's the truth."

"If they want it so bad why haven't they tried again?"

"They have, three times. We weren't expecting the action at Zurich, but we're ready now."

Stewart sipped at his drink. He shook his head. "You still haven't said why 'they' are trying so hard to destroy data available to anyone who wants it."

"They're convinced that it's fake, and they're sure we plan to use it to convince the world that the situation is much worse than it actually is so we can gain political leverage with the Thirds."

"That's insane! You can see it—"

"*You* can see it. They don't go into orbit with you."

Stewart was silent for a few moments. "Okay, I'll buy it. I suppose they could be that stupid."

"They could be, and of late too often are."

"What do you want me to do?"

"We're going to have a top-level meeting tomorrow, and I want them to really understand how it is. No pulling your punches. All right?"

"Sure, Jeff." He held up his glass and stared at the swirling patterns illuminated by the light from the fire. "It's a rotten situation, you know." Prima nodded. "What are the chances these clowns will try another hit?"

"Very good, but we're covered. Why don't you get some sleep. We'll pick you up tomorrow morn-

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ing around nine." Prima stood up and dropped some bills on the table.

Stewart stood up also, stretched and yawned deeply. "What are the chances that the sun will shine tomorrow?"

"One in a million."

* * *

The sun didn't shine the next day, and if the terrorists made any further attempts on Stewart, he didn't see them.

The meeting was held in a building less than a kilometer from the hotel. Most of the buildings within the convention complex were interconnected by a system of tunnels. Small electric cars carried delegates to and from their destinations without regard to bothersome weather or traffic.

The room was a large one with a highly polished oak table in its center. The table was at least two meters wide and five meters long. Heavy armchairs, all red leather, brass studs and dark wood, surrounded the table. With only nine men present, the room seemed deserted.

Stewart sat close to the head of the table and watched the others, while Prima discussed some incomprehensible matters of form with the delegates.

As Prima spoke, Stewart noticed that he had a lot more gray in his hair than when Stewart had met him at the earlier conference. Stewart remembered with a start that they were the same age, but Prima looked years older than he should have.

Stewart had arranged his photographic displays in the proper sequence to match the information he was going to project on a large daylight screen at the far end of the room. Prima introduced Stewart but he did not identify any of the others. Stewart could tell the national origin of some from the accents, but had no idea who they were.

Stewart addressed the group for almost two hours. They asked few questions, and none of them seemed surprised by the data he presented. As he had said to Prima the night before, the situation was not good. He talked about droughts in Africa, the Ukraine, and Midwest America. He showed the results of floods in India, Central and South America. He talked about the gradual cooling of the atmosphere; the effect of the circumpolar vortex on rain patterns; the problems caused by particulate matter suspended in the atmosphere; the ruination of crops by increased ultra-violet radiation due to destruction of vast amounts of ozone. He talked about problems caused by the "Green Revolution" and the widespread use of hybrid grains. He showed them the latest photographs documenting the spread of the voracious plant virus called gamma-5, which was in the process of decimating 62% of the world's wheat crop.

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When the last slide had faded from the screen, Stewart stared at the blank whiteness for the few seconds before he turned to the somber-faced men seated around the oak table. He tapped his leg lightly with the pointer he had used during the discussion. "So, there you are. Any questions?"

"If only we had stuck with the slower growing varieties," one of the delegates said softly. He was looking at a photograph showing the gamma-5 infection. He didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular.

"It would not have helped, Nikoli," said another.

"Crop failures could have been localized," the first man said.

"That's just for wheat," said Prima, "and just for one disease."

"If not for the hybrid crops this calamity would have come five years ago," said still another delegate.

"Yes, and who could have foretold these climatic changes? Weather patterns have been favorable, and getting better for the last five years, until now, until this year."

Gradually all of the delegates had begun to argue, and Stewart stood there, astounded, thinking: *Our lives depend on these men, our lives . . .*

Prima stood up. "Gentlemen, please. Gentlemen!"

There was a sharp crack, like the sound of a rifle. There was immediate silence and everyone was looking at Stewart. He had hit the table with the metal pointer. He hadn't realized he had done it until they looked at him. He looked at the pointer as if he couldn't remember where he'd gotten it, then he shook his head slightly and tossed the pointer onto the table.

"Thanks, Will," said Prima with a grin.

Stewart shrugged.

"Gentlemen," Prima said, "I think we had better adjourn now. I think we could use a little break. I'd like to thank Dr. Stewart for his excellent briefing." There was a smattering of applause. Prima looked at his watch. "It's almost noon. I think we ought to reconvene here about two o'clock. Any objections? Good, two it is." He turned to Stewart as the others left the conference room.

"You've been a great help, Will. Thank you."

"Is that all you'll be needing me for?"

Prima nodded. "What do you want to do now? Go back to the station? Want a vacation? I can arrange it for you, if you like. Go anwhere you want, two weeks, a month. You name it."

"You've got that kind of pull?"

Prima nodded again. " 'Fraid so."

"I think I'll go back up to the station. It's . . . well, a lot quieter up there."

"I kind of thought you might do

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that. I envy that access to quiet. There aren't many places on earth that are quiet anymore. Besides, you might as well enjoy it while you can.''

''What do you mean?''

''When things fall apart down here, do you think people are going to want to spend money on space? The stations will probably be abandoned; at least for a while.''

''We've talked about it up there, but I've never heard it sound so official.''

''It's not official,'' Prima smiled. ''It's just a possibility that has to be considered. Hell, enough of this gloom. Let's go to lunch and then I'll arrange to have you back in space before midnight, okay?''

''Sounds good.''

In the elevator down to the parking garage, Prima described their destination in Old Bern. ''It's called the *Ermitage* on Marktgasse. The cuisine is French, and it's magnificent. On the way you'll get to see the *Zeitglocken,* their famous clock tower built in the twelfth century. In fact, all of that area is fantastic. Marktgasse used to be the main street. Lots of old buildings, fountains, little shops, and so forth. It's closed to traffic, so we'll have to walk a little. Got your rain coat?''

''Is it still raining out there?'' Stewart frowned. ''You know, I haven't seen one mountain yet. We might as well be in Kansas.''

Prima laughed. ''We can take the Mercedes into Old Bern,'' he said as they stepped out of the elevator.

As the car approached, Stewart could see one man sitting next to the driver and another in the back. ''We've got company,'' said Stewart.

''Guards. Marines from the embassy.'' He saw Stewart's questioning look. ''Just because the meeting is over doesn't mean the terrorists are through trying.''

He turned to Prima, exasperated. ''How long am I going to have to keep looking over my shoulder?''

''Once you're out of Switzerland you shouldn't have any trouble. *You'll* be out of it.'' They entered the car and it pulled out into the street.

''I guess you won't be out of it,'' Stewart said.

''No,'' Prima sighed. ''I suppose I could be. I could quit this damn job, go back to Ohio, write textbooks and my memoirs.'' He grinned suddenly. ''I guess I've come to believe in my own importance too much to quit.'' He stared musingly out the window at the treelined street. ''So much depends on what we do here in the next week. It's rather terrifying.''

Both men were silent as the car moved into Bern's Old Section. Prima's mood changed again shortly, and he began to name the buildings they passed. Lost in his own thoughts, Stewart heard little of it.

They were moving rapidly along *Tiefenau-Strasse*. The river *Aare*,

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sometimes visible through the trees and buildings, was about 100 meters to their left. As they reached the junction with *Neubruck-Strasse,* an old Volkswagen bus pulled into their path. The driver of the Mercedes swerved to avoid a collision, ran over the high curb and struck a low iron fence. The driver opened the door, ready to leap out and accost the driver of the Volkswagen. The Marine sitting next to him grabbed him around the neck and hauled him back into the car.

The side door of the Volkswagen slid open and three men leaped out and ran towards the Mercedes. The Marine reached over the driver for the door. It was just beyond his grasp. The first of the three reached the open door and thrust the barrel of a small shotgun into the car and blew the Marine's face off.

The Marine next to Prima and Stewart had pushed them both to the floor of the car before it had stopped moving. As the first Marine was blasted back into the car, the second fired half a dozen explosive rounds into the chest of the man with the shotgun.

"Shut the fucking door!" the Marine screamed.

The blood-drenched driver made a grab for the door and one of the terrorists caught his arm, pulled him into the street, and dispatched him bloodily with a machine pistol.

The other terrorist fired at the Marine through the rear window of the car, but the bullets splattered against the thick glass, causing spider web patterns.

The same glass that protected the occupants of the car protected the terrorists surrounding it. The Marine could see the man with the machine pistol pull the pin on a small grenade, silently count the few second's delay and, at the last moment, toss the grenade into the front seat of the car where it burst, immediately filling the car with a choking, eye-searing, blue-white narcotic smoke. The three men in the car lost consciousness.

* * *

I must be alive, Stewart thought, *because I hurt like Hell!* Stewart's hands were bound behind his back in a painful position. A teeth-rattling vibration coupled with a deafening roar served to round out his acute discomfort. He groaned and tried to straighten out his legs. "This one's awake!" a voice yelled above the deep roar.

Stewart's eyes burned and everything was obscured by a watery haze as he was pulled roughly to a sitting position. He gasped as pain shot through his shoulders and arms. He blinked to clear his eyes.

His tormentor was a young man dressed in light green fatigues. "Listen to me, spaceman!" he shouted. "Don't give us any trouble or we'll toss you overboard! Got it?" The man slapped Stewart with the back of his hand. The sharp stinging blow brought tears to his

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eyes again. He could taste blood from a cut lip.

Stewart nodded. "I understand," he croaked, not at all sure he understood anything.

"All right, now shut up!" The man shoved him back on the floor and moved away.

The trip lasted an eternity of slightly less than three hours. Stewart was pulled to his feet and held between two men in front of a sliding door. He realized for the first time that he was in a helicopter. As the copter settled to ground, he could see that they were deep in the mountains, in a narrow glacial valley. For the first time since his return to Earth he could see the sun.

The door was pulled open while the copter was still a few meters from the ground and Stewart was treated to a little joke as his captors playfully thrust him out the door, then pulled him back.

When the copter touched down they shoved him roughly out and he just managed to keep his balance. He stumbled forward and turned just in time to see Prima, less fortunate than he, sprawl heavily into the wet meadow grass.

As soon as a great mound of equipment had been unloaded—rather more gently than the prisoners—and carried into the trees, the copter lifted and headed back down the valley at high speed.

Three of the terrorists, armed with formidable-looking automatic weapons, had remained with them. One of them indicated that Stewart and Prima should move into the trees and sit. When they had done so he squatted a short distance from them with his back against a tree. His machine gun wasn't pointed directly at them but the man was obviously alert. The other two pulled an assortment of plastic-wrapped breads, cheeses, and sausages from an old rucksack. Another rucksack yielded three unlabeled bottles of wine. As the three ate, their guard's eyes never left his prisoners.

When Stewart sat down beside Prima he had thought they might be prevented from talking, but the gunmen didn't seem to care.

"You hurt very much?" Stewart asked.

Prima shook his head. "No. My muscles ache, but that's all. How about you?"

"I'm okay." He looked at their captors. "Who the Hell are these clowns? Do you have any idea what they want with us?"

"Possibly ransom. I don't think they took us just to kill us; they could have done that at the car. Of course, I might be wrong."

"One of them called me 'spaceman,' so I assume they know who I am. Must have figured I'd be worth something. I'm not sure to whom . . ." He grinned crookedly.

When the guard finished eating he called to the others. One of them untied Stewart's and Prima's hands and gave them food and wine.

Occasionally, one of the men

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scanned the valley with a pair of binoculars. It was less than half an hour after the helicopter had dropped them in the valley that the man's search was rewarded. He stood up, called softly to his companions, and pointed up the valley.

Prima looked over his shoulder then turned back, disgustedly. "Horsemen! Bloody barbarians."

Within minutes of being sighted, the riders had entered the small camp and dismounted. There were four riders and twelve horses. All but the man guarding them and one of the riders began to pack the equipment onto the horses. The one rider was at least two meters tall and possessed a bushy black moustache. As he approached the captives he pulled thick leather gloves off his hands and smiled disarmingly.

"Dr. Prima," he said, thrusting out his hand. "We meet under unfortunate circumstances. I trust you're unharmed?" He turned to Stewart. "And you must be Dr. Stewart." Again he put out his hand and, reflexively, Stewart clasped it.

"You have the advantage, sir," said Prima.

The man grinned. "In more ways than one. I'm called Draken."

"Well, Mr. Draken—"

"No mister; just Draken."

"Draken. Maybe you could explain what you want with us."

"All in good time. Right now we have to travel quite a distance. Can you ride?" Both men nodded. "Good."

Draken called out to one of the riders and the other brought two wool-lined, hooded coats. "You'll need these. We have to cross a high pass. No snow this time of year, but it's still too cold for what you're wearing." He turned and walked away to examine the progress of the loading.

Stewart had not been on a horse since he was a child. He still ached from the hours he had spent tied up in the helicopter. The ascent to the pass and the descent into another narrow glacial valley took four torturous hours.

When he was finally allowed to dismount, Stewart's legs wouldn't hold him and he had to hold onto his horse to keep from falling to the ground. Prima, he noticed, hadn't fared much better.

In the deep blue evening shadows, Stewart could see a cluster of small stone buildings into which the men were carrying the equipment. Their guard was still close, still silent.

As Draken passed one time, Stewart called out. "Why the Hell couldn't the helicopter have brought us all the way?"

The man's smile was wide and his teeth looked abnormally white in the darkness. "Security. The people on the chopper have no idea where this camp is."

"Are we still in Switzerland?" asked Prima.

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"Does it matter?" asked Draken.

"When are you going to fill us in on the master plan?" said Prima.

"In a few minutes. Do you see that small house? The third on the left?" He pointed. "Go there, upstairs, and wait."

Draken watched them as they limped slowly toward the little stone house, their ever-present shadow with the machine gun a few paces behind.

A young technician loaded down with electronic gear almost collided with Draken in the deepening darkness. "Sorry," she said.

"No harm done," he said. "Do me a favor? When you've delivered that stuff, tell Wolf we're ready. Okay?"

"Sure, Draken." She hurried away.

The stone stairs to the second story were on the outside of the building. A heavy curtain hung in the doorway. Stewart pushed passed it into a short passage and under another curtain. The room was empty except for a rough wooden table and a dozen straightbacked chairs. The light came from three electric lanterns suspended from ceiling beams. The windows were covered with black cloth.

Within minutes, people began to enter the room. None of them said anything to Stewart or Prima, who had taken seats facing the curtained door. Three men and one woman were facing Stewart and Prima when Draken entered, accompanied by a small, intense man. Draken took a chair near the door, while the other man sat on the table in front of the prisoners. He had a small tape recorder which he placed beside him and switched on.

The man had light brown hair and piercing, pale blue eyes. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his face less than half a meter from Prima's.

"My name is Wolf," he said. His accent was German. "I am the leader of this cadre. Each of the people here is representing a different, international political-action group. Your abduction was ordered for the purpose of obtaining confirming information and statements relevant to your country's true position on the present world crisis."

"Why am I here?" asked Stewart.

"We have known of your complicity in this plot for some time, Dr. Stewart, and you were recognized by one of those assigned to abduct Dr. Prima. He felt you could be of some use to us."

"What the *hell* is this 'plot' I'm involved in?" said Stewart.

The woman laughed, but there was no humor in it. "We are not playing games, Stewart," she said. Her voice was deeeptively gentle, soft—and frightening.

"Maybe we should play their game for a while," Draken said. "Explain it to them as if they had no idea what we're talking about—"

"I don't," interrupted Stewart.

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"—and maybe they'll realize how stupid it is to lie to us."

Wolf nodded. "Also, he could actually be a dupe. It is not very likely considering the evidence, but who can tell?"

Wolf turned to face Stewart directly. "You were ordered to prepare documents and deliver them to Dr. Prima. True?"

Stewart nodded.

"These documents were falsified to show the world situation to be much worse than it is." He held up his hand as Stewart opened his mouth. "Wait. First listen, then comment.

"The purpose of this falsified information was to convince the Third World that its only hope for survival is complete submission to the Western capitalist states and their lackeys. Actually, there are vast grain surpluses throughout the U.S. and Canada which are being witheld to force a political ideology on the Third World by using the threat of famine. A famine which would not naturally occur."

Stewart sat in stunned silence for a few moments. He glanced at Prima who was engrossed with a hangnail.

"I think you are serious," said Stewart.

"Believe me, Dr. Stewart, we are."

"Then you're insane."

"Then you deny the charge?"

"Good *God*, man! Not three days ago, from orbit, I looked down on the ruins of Dakar. It was destroyed in the food riots. All of Central Africa is a dust bowl! The Ukraine, Northern India, Mid-west America, Indo-China—you name it—all the same! Droughts, floods, the gamma-5 pandemic—"

"Lies," said Wolf.

Stewart shook his head. He turned to Prima. "Jeff, *tell* him."

Prima smiled wearily. "There is no way to convince this man, Will, short of taking him into orbit to see for himself." He leaned back in his chair and contemplated Wolf's expressionless face.

"I do not think this is an effective method, Wolf," the young woman said.

"You always did prefer the more direct means," Wold replied.

He turned to Prima again. "What have you to say to the charge?"

"You're wrong about our plans."

Wolf's eyebrows went up, showing his doubt.

"What I intend to propose," continued Prima, "is a worldwide aid plan that involves all the developed countries. A plan to give food, machinery, medicine, et cetera, to the Thirds, no strings attached."

Stewart, who had been listening with a growing look of amazement, laughed. "You're totally insane, too!"

Ignoring Stewart, Wolf shook his head. "If you think I'd believe that, your naiveté is astonishing."

"I think I can prove it," Prima said.

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"How?" said Draken.

"I noticed that my briefcase was among the things loaded on the horses. Look in it."

Wolf glanced over his shoulder at Draken. "True?"

Draken nodded. "We got it. Haven't had time to look through it yet."

Five silent minutes had passed when Draken pushed through the curtain carrying the briefcase. At Wolf's direction, he handed it to Prima. As Prima flipped the latch, the guard moved behind his back and loudly cocked his weapon.

Prima pulled a thin folder from the case and handed it to Wolf. "Look through that."

With Draken looking over his shoulder, Wolf quickly scanned the short document. He slowly shut the folder and looked up.

"He's telling the truth about this," he tapped the folder. "They *do* plan to recommend an aid program."

"I don't get it," said one of the men at the table. He spoke with an American accent. His words were slightly slurred due to the lack of upper front teeth.

The man seated next to him at the table cleared his throat. "For once, Jerry has a point. I do not 'get it' either." The speaker was a tall black man, taller even than Draken, who sounded like he had learned his English at Oxford.

While the two spoke, Wolf stared at Prima, a frown on his face. When the others at the table started to join in, Wolf held up his hand.

"All right!" he shouted. "Shut up!"

Wolf looked from Prima to Stewart and back again. "Stewart, you say your documents are not fakes?"

Stewart nodded, puzzled.

The murmur began again but ceased when Wolf again held up his hand. He slowly began to look through Prima's briefcase. He pulled a set of the prints Stewart had brought from the orbital observatory. He looked at each print and read the brief explanation printed on the back.

Wolf pushed himself off the table and turned to the others who were seated around the room. "This part is over. Clear out."

"What the Hell!" said Jerry. "You can't throw us out like that."

"Yes, Jerry, I can," said Wolf, with deadly softness. "You know—or should know—I can do whatever I feel I must to achieve a successful conclusion to this mission. And I do not have to explain anything I do to you. Now I want everyone out, with the exception of Draken." He turned to the guard behind Prima. "Give your weapon to Draken and leave."

Draken took the machine gun and went to Wolf's side as the guard left the room.

The tall African stood up slowly and stretched. "If Wolf wants us to leave, he has a good reason. But

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good reason or not, he was chosen as our commander for this jaunt and his word is our law."

He left the room followed by the others. Jerry, the last out, paused with his hand on the curtain, a look of intense hatred on his face. He opened his mouth to speak, then simply shook his head and left.

Wolf snapped the recorder off and sat in one of the vacated chairs. "You shits are going to pull a fast one, aren't you?" he said. "I've got the feeling that the whole population conference is a sham."

Prima said nothing, his expression blank.

"Draken, what do you think they are planning?" asked Wolf.

"Well, if the situation is as bad as Stewart says it is—and personally I believe it is—then the plan Prima's recommending is useless."

Wolf nodded. "I agree. Tell us, Prima. Why are you going to recommend this worthless crap."

"I thought you didn't believe this stuff," Stewart said, tapping the photos.

"Let us say 'officially,' I *can't* believe it. Realistically, I can't *ignore* it."

"Why do you think he sent the others out?" said Draken. "We don't need that bullshit rhetoric now."

"Stewart, listen!" Wolf said. "If it is necessary to bend reality to accomplish our goals we will do it. Prima and I are on different sides of the political fence, but he uses the same tactics that I do!"

"Not quite," interjected Prima.

"Oh?"

"You murdered three people when you kidnapped us," said Stewart.

"Stewart, unless I'm mistaken, Prima is planning the murder of approximately two billion people. The man could go down in history—if anyone's left to write it—as the most despicable mass murderer the human race has ever known."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Stewart shouted.

"Use your head, man!" Wolf shouted back. "These bastards are going to tell the biggest lie in history. They are going to say: 'We are going to help you, we will do this and do that and everything will be fine.' Like *Hell!* What they are going to do is stall around until everyone in Asia, Africa and Latin America is stone dead from famine." He turned to Draken. "What do you think?"

"I read it the same way. The question is *why?*"

"Yes," said Wolf, nodding. "Any comment, Prima?"

"That's the most ridiculous piece of sophistry I've ever heard," he said calmly.

Wolf sighed deeply; it was the answer he had expected. Abruptly he stood up. "Put these two in their cage, Draken. We can let Maria work on them tomorrow." He left the room without a glance or another word.

"Maria's not a nice lady," Dra-

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ken said. "She'll probably get Jerry to help. He's nasty, too."

"What do you expect to find out?" Stewart said.

"They'll probably try to get Prima to verify Wolf's accusation. If they do, then they'll want to know the motive."

"I thought he didn't want them to know," said Prima.

Draken smiled. "No, that's not why he sent them out. They have a habit of arguing pointless nuances for hours on end. It makes it hard for Wolf to concentrate."

"Why did he let you stay?"

"He trusts me. We've known each other for a long time." He moved toward the door. "Now I'll take you to where you're going to spend the night."

They followed him down the narrow stone steps and across the "main street" of the tiny village. Their path was marked by small, hooded globes that glowed with a dim blue light. Stewart could see lines of the small lights branching off in various directions. The night was very cold.

They climbed another set of exterior steps. Draken pulled a heavy wooden door open and the men stepped into a narrow passage and pushed under a thick black curtain into a small, windowless room. A small electric lantern, giving off a harsh light, hung from the ceiling. There were two folding cots set up with a stack of heavy wool blankets on each.

"Somewhat primitive," said Draken, "but I hope you'll find it adequate. There's food if you want it." He motioned toward some plastic-wrapped packages sitting on a small table in the corner. "There will be an armed guard outside. Good night, gentlemen."

The door closed softly. They heard the rasp of an iron bolt being thrust into place.

Stewart sat down on one of the cots with a groan of fatigue. The cot creaked. "What the Hell are we gonna do?"

"I don't know, Will," Prima said, as he stretched out on his cot. "I really don't know."

* * *

Stewart awoke with a start. His heart was beating painfully fast. Someone had unbolted the door and entered the room. The lantern was out and Stewart could see nothing. He sat up quietly.

"Don't say anything, Stewart." The voice was muffled, but he recognized it as Draken's.

The lantern flooded the room with brilliance and Stewart winced. Draken's head was enclosed in a bulky black bubble. There was a single, huge lens in the center of the thing. He held the straps of two more black helmets in his hand. The other hand held two rucksacks and a machine gun. He was dressed in a one-piece black suit and had another rucksack strapped to his

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back. He looked like an astronaut, suited up for an EVA—except that the image was negative: black suit rather than white.

He set the rucksacks on the floor and sat down on the cot next to Stewart, still holding the helmets and the gun.

From across the room, Prima grunted and pushed his head from under the blankets. "What's going on?"

Draken lifted the helmet off and put it next to his feet. "We're leaving. I'm taking you out of here, back to Bern." He slipped his rucksack off and put it next to his helmet.

"You're letting us go?" said Stewart.

Prima pushed his covers off and reached for his shoes. He slept in his clothes.

"No, I'm not letting you go: I'm helping you escape."

"Jesus," Stewart said, "this is too much for me."

"Are you DCI?" Prima asked.

Draken nodded. "Sort of. Branch of it."

"This is going to blow your cover for good."

Draken shrugged. "It's worth it."

"DCI?" said Stewart.

"I work for an American intelligence agency," Draken said, bending over one of the rucksacks. He withdrew a small wad of black cloth. "This is an Army surplus jump suit, like I'm wearing. It'll

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keep you warm even in a blizzard. I've got boot liners, too. Keep your feet warm and dry." What he pulled out looked like a thin pair of socks.

"Are we walking out?" asked Prima.

"It's the only way. Horses can't go the way we have to go."

"God," said Stewart, pulling on the jump suit. "I hate those horses."

Draken held up one of the black helmets. "This is also Army surplus. A Star Scope by name."

He slipped the thing over Stewart's head. It was a snug fit and Stewart mumbled about the helmet's weight. Draken snapped the visor up, made an adjustment, and pushed it down again.

Stewart's perception of the room altered sickeningly. The lens covered almost a full 180° and it was all compressed onto the small, wrap-around screen on the inside of the visor. He could see his feet and the ceiling at the same time, all in a pale greenish-white tint.

Draken slurped across the screen and cut the lantern off. Everything in the room was still discernible, but just barely. The light source seemed to come from Draken's hand. Stewart realized suddenly that the room was illuminated by the glowing numerals on Draken's watch.

"It'll be much brighter outside. There are no clouds tonight." He switched the lantern on again and the lens automatically closed down with a faint whir. "Leave the Scope on, Stewart. Walk around and get used to the viewscreen. Here's your helmet, Prima. You do the same. There are receivers in the helmets, and I've got throat mikes for each of us."

In a short time, both men could walk without tripping over their own feet and Draken decided they should leave. He adjusted their rucksacks and checked their helmets and throat mikes. He bent over his own rucksack and when he stood up he held two small machine pistols with holsters and belts. Stewart noted that they were the same type that had been used so efficiently during his capture in Bern.

"I don't expect you'll have to use these," said Draken, handing the weapons to each man, "but it won't hurt to have them in case. Don't use them in the village—under any circumstances—or we've bought it. We must get out of camp undetected." He pulled his helmet on and shrugged his rucksack into place. As he passed under the lantern he shattered it with a casual swing of his gun barrel.

"Don't trip over the guard," Draken said, his voice tinny in the helmet's receiver.

They stepped over the prostrate figure just outside the door and onto the stone stairs. Through their helmets the dim blue lights lit the small village better than floodlights could have.

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Stewart paused momentarily and Draken touched him lightly on the arm, correctly evaluating the reason for his hesitation. "Don't worry, it's only bright for us."

"Doesn't anyone else have these Star Scopes?" asked Prima.

Draken chuckled. "Not any more."

They went around the side of the house and headed for the trees standing about 100 meters from the village.

The valley was U shaped, with a reasonably flat floor between two steep walls. Once in the trees, they headed up the valley, closest to the cliff on their left. To their right a small stream glowed with a faint phosphorescence.

"There's a pass about four kilometers from here," Draken said as they walked. "We have to cross over to the next valley. There's a transmitter up there I stashed about three days ago—"

"Were you expecting this?" interrupted Stewart.

"No. Three days ago I didn't even know why we came here. I just like to have a bolt hole.

"Anyway," Draken continued, "we'll be picked up a half-hour after I put in the call."

A little over 40 minutes after they started the three men stood at the base of a narrow crack in the face of the cliff.

"It's an almost vertical climb for about 100 meters, then a gentle slope up and over to the next valley. The climb isn't too difficult, but you'll have to watch what you're doing."

As Draken had promised, their upward route wasn't very arduous, but it was time consuming. All three men were close to exhaustion by the time they were 100 meters above the valley floor.

After a short rest, they started up the slope and soon emerged from the towering cliffs and stood overlooking another quiet valley. Stewart stood near the edge of the steep drop for a few moments and then turned back to where the other two were sitting.

"This looks rougher than the one we came up," he said.

"We don't have to climb down," said Draken. "The transmitter is about a half-kilometer from here." He pointed parallel to the cliff's edge. "Along that ridge." Draken stood up.

Within minutes the three stood under a low rock overhang where Draken had hidden the transmitter. As Draken moved toward the back of the shelter, Prima sat down just beyond the overhanging rock and pulled his helmet off. With a sigh of relief Stewart followed suit. The night was cold and dark, the stars like diamond chips on black satin. Stewart could just distinguish Prima's form sitting less than a meter from him.

They sat in silence for a long while, then Stewart shifted his body a little closer to Prima.

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"Jeff?" said Stewart hesitantly.

"What is it, Will?"

"I've been thinking about what Wolf said back there . . ." He paused again.

"You want to know if he guessed right." Prima sighed deeply.

At that point Draken joined them. "Had some trouble with the transmitter at first but it's okay now. I got the message off." He had his helmet visor raised, but they couldn't see his face. "I heard what you were saying," he tapped his helmet and Stewart realized his throat mike was still transmitting. "I'd like to hear the answer."

Prima was silent for a few moments. "Hell," he said softly, his voice barely audible above the wind. "Hell, why not? Of course he was right. Right on all counts."

"Damn," said Draken, quietly. "I'd kind of hoped . . . oh, shit."

"Is that it?" said Stewart.

"What?"

"Man calmly says: 'Yeah, uh we're gonna kill a couple billion people.' What the hell is that? Why? Why is it necessary to lie, to give them false hopes? That could push the death rate up a lot higher than it has to go. How can you possibly justify what you plan to do?"

"Justify it?" Prima said, a sharp edge to his voice. "It's what must be done."

"How can you sit there and coldly condemn billions of humans to death as a matter of necessity?" Stewart shouted.

"Damn it, Will," Prima shouted back, "I didn't condemn them! I've been screaming my head off for the last twenty years! No one wanted to listen. It wasn't profitable, politically or ecomomically. Greed and bullheaded stupidity got us here, and now the only road out leads straight through a die-off!"

"What do you mean 'it's what must be done'?" Draken interjected.

Prima sat with his elbows on his knees, his expression one of intense pain. His voice was tired when he spoke. "It's a calculated risk, Will. If we stand back and say: 'Sorry, but it's your own fault, and we can't do anything to get you out of it,' they will tear us apart. In a few months they can pull us down with them. If we want any faint chance of surviving what's coming we have got to get them down *before* they realize their fall is inevitable."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Draken.

"No one is sure. We *know* one course of action leads to certain annihilation. The other gives us about one chance in five of greeting the twenty-first century as something more than stoneage barbarians."

"I don't like the idea of walking over two billion dead bodies to get there," said Stewart.

"I don't know anyone who does. I'm sure it won't—"

He stopped, stunned, as a blindingly harsh light flashed into being

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directly overhead, freezing them into immobility.

"Down!" yelled Draken. In one continuous movement he grabbed the front of Prima's jump suit and pulled him to the ground and kicked Stewart backward off the rock he was sitting on.

Stewart landed heavily on his back, breath knocked out but otherwise unhurt. The light cast dense black shadows that shifted with confusing rapidity.

Suddenly Draken was beside him with his helmet. "Put this on! That's Wolf out there, and I've got a feeling we're going to have a bit of a go 'round, wot?"

The flare still hung in the sky above them, but it was flickering slightly. Draken glanced up at it. "Defective, should last longer than that. Let's move farther back under the rocks. Keep low."

"How did they manage to follow us," said Prima when they were under the rock again.

"It's possible that Wolf or one of the others hung a micro-transmitter on one of you—or maybe me."

"I thought he couldn't follow us in the dark."

"Maybe he got another Star Scope somewhere. Maybe he's got cat's eyes! Damn it, I don't care how he did it, what we've got to worry about is that he did!" He glanced at his watch. "That chopper will be here in fifteen minutes. If we can hold out that long, we should be OK."

"Draken!" The voice from below was amplified and echoed across the valley. "Draken, come down. You won't be harmed."

"Listen," Draken said, "that flare is going to go out in a few seconds; when it does we're going to run like Hell, to the left, up and behind this rock we're under. Think both of you can make it?"

"Yes," said Prima

"Sure," agreed Stewart.

As he had predicted, the flare flickered one last time and died. "Now! Follow me!" They followed him from under the rock up a steep, narrow path that led to the top of the overhang. They were half way up the path when another flare ignited overhead. Bullets ricocheted off the rocks around them when the men below saw what they were trying.

The top of the rock was steeply sloped and devoid of vegetation. Draken led them to a shallow, bowl-like, rain-eroded depression into which they jumped. A thin slit in the bottom of the bowl had let most of the rainwater out. A thin skin of ice cracked under their feet.

"The only way up here is the way we came," Draken said. He slumped back against the edge of the rock. "Also, if they toss any grenades, they'll roll right off the rock."

"Unless they get one right in here with us," said Stewart.

"Always thinking of the bright side, what?" said Draken.

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"Draken," the amplified voice echoed, "you don't have a chance. We can wait you out. Come down now and we'll let you go your way. We want Prima. You can walk away, no questions."

When the voice first sounded, Draken switched his weapon to single shot and took careful aim at the flare overhead. Although its motion was intentionally erratic, it was not too fast, and Draken was able to hit its tiny roter with his second shot. A few seconds after the flare dropped from sight another took its place.

He was taking aim at the new flare when a grenade landed less than two meters from their bowl. It clattered noisily down the steep rock and off the edge, exploding with a tunderclap that vibrated through the rock.

"I felt that one," said Prima.

Draken swore softly. "That was a concussion grenade. If one of those things explodes up here it'll knock us flat, even if we're not directly exposed to the blast."

As he finished speaking they saw a grenade arch overhead and all three threw themselves to the bottom of their bowl. The grenade hit the rock, bounced into the air and exploded. Stewart felt a bone-jarring shock and a constriction in his chest and then he blacked out.

Stewart awoke to the sound of gunfire. He saw Draken at the edge of the bowl, firing his weapon down the slope. Stewart's foot was pinned under Prima's inert body. By the time he had freed it and gotten his pistol out of its holster, the firing had stopped.

"Stay down, Will. They're pulling back for a while."

"Was I out long?"

"A few seconds, I think. Not long." He looked at Prima. "How's he?"

Stewart felt for a pulse; it was strong. "Alive."

"Listen!" Draken grabbed his arm. "Do you hear it? The chopper!"

Stewart could feel the low throb of the helicopter's engines. "Where is it?"

"It's close. Must be below our line of sight."

The terrorists began to fire their guns again and suddenly the chopper passed directly over their rock bowl, the rotor wash picking up ice slivers and spinning them madly through the air.

Draken waved and saw one of the pilots acknowledge him. The helicopter's tail twisted around until its nose was facing the terrorist's position, then the gunner fired a salvo of antipersonnel rockets. There was a deafening explosion and an angry orange fireball rose into the sky.

Stewart saw a figure in the chopper's open hatch. The man was waving and pointing toward the path that led to the top of the rock. There was a burst of gunfire from below and the man pitched forward

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with a scream, clutching his chest. The chopper rose up and to the left, trying to get out of the range of the terrorist weapons.

"I think we're about to get it, Draken," Stewart said, resting his pistol on the lip of the bowl.

Three terrorists scrambled up the rock, firing as they came. Draken got off a half-dozen rounds and ran out of ammunition. His burst caught one man in the belly, and Stewart hit one in the thigh. The third man shot Draken as he was trying to reload. The impact spun him around and knocked him against Stewart and part way out of their bowl.

With uncanny speed, the remaining terrorist ran forward and kicked Stewart's gun out of his hand. Ignoring the blinding pain in his gun hand, Stewart reached forward and grabbed the man behind the knee. Off balance, with one foot still in the air, the man fell heavily, the lip of the bowl catching him in the middle of the back. The man screamed and twisted forward onto Stewart and then he was still, his back broken.

As Stewart pushed the man off him, he heard sporadic gunfire beyond the edge of the rock, but nothing moved on top of the rock.

He turned Draken over and raised the visor of his helmet. His eyes were open and lifeless. The blood that had soaked Draken's black jump suit was invisible except where it reflected the light of the flare.

"God *damn,*" Stewart said

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softly. He pushed the visor down and turned to Prima, who was struggling to sit up.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

Stewart sat down on the rim of the bowl, his shoulders bent forward. "Less than five minutes, I'd guess."

The chopper appeared above them again and a man in the hatch waved, and then it moved off.

"I guess they want us to get down off this damn rock," said Prima.

"Suits me." He climbed out of the bowl and started down the rock.

"Hey, what's wrong with Draken?" Prima was bending over Draken's body.

Stewart didn't stop or answer. He was already halfway down the path when he heard Prima's softly muttered "Oh" in his helmet receiver.

* * *

They sat in the same booth as before, close to the fire place. The padded seats and table seemed to have been pulled—like warm taffy—right out of the wooden wall. Stewart followed the flowing lines with his eyes, thinking about the past three days.

The helicopter had got them to Bern at dawn. Stewart ate, took a hot shower and went to bed. He had slept until about 8:30 p.m., when his phone rang. Prima told him he could get him aboard the Zurich shuttle to the orbital station at 11:00 p. m. if Stewart still wanted to go back. Stewart said yes at the word shuttle. Prima then invited him to dinner, which offer he also accepted.

Now, dinner over, small glasses of wine in front of each man, they sat in silence. Prima sighed and sat back. He looked at his watch.

"You'll have to leave for the airport in a few minutes. I've got a car waiting."

"Thanks, Jeff." He took a sip of wine. "When are you going to make your proposal to the conference?"

"I presented it this afternoon."

He looks so tired, Stewart thought. *He looks five years older than he did three days ago. I wonder how I look?*

"What did they think of it?"

"They loved it. God help us, they really loved it."

"Did they find Wolf?"

Prima shook his head. "It doesn't matter. They won't believe him. There's nothing he—or anybody—could say that could take their hope away now."

Stewart nodded and stood up. "Well . . . I guess it's time."

"Yes. Thanks, Will. For everything."

The clouds had finally cleared, and the night air was cool and fresh. Stewart paused on the curb and looked up at the stars. He sighed and climbed into the waiting car. ★

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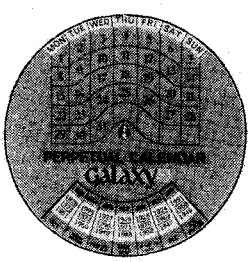

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Dear Sir:

The short poem you'll find attached to this letter is, I believe, an appropriate expression of what science fiction is to those who love it, and could be to everyone else:

Science Fiction
The best and fondest
of all our dreams
are wrapped up in science fiction.
It is a plea to the human race
to seek out the infinite
and a warning of the consequences
if we don't.
It is a world of make-believe,
or if and maybe and just suppose,
the greatest, most enduring aspirations,
the one last racial wishing-well
not yet gone dry.

Sincerely,
Gary McKinley

RR #1
Box 129-40
Eldon, Missouri 65026

As good a definition as any I've seen.

Dear Mr. Baen:

Re: C. Henrich's letter on possible monopole UFO propulsion (Feb.). The gravity and inertia defying antics of UFOs cannot be explained except by a gravity shield. Such a shield would have to be generated by a new physical force (only four are known) since it would produce a gravitational field without the addition of large masses. The shield would cancel inertial mass; which educes a classic question: Is inertial mass intrinsic or due to the gravitational field of the universe (Mach's Principle)?

A recent patent (#3,626,605) claims to have experimentally verified such a fifth force. The inventor claims that if materials constituted of half integral spin nuclei, like copper, are accelerated relative to each other, the nuclei become increasingly polarized under a fifth force and that a gravitational field arises, which can be made to balance gravity and reduce inertial mass to zero. I imagine a craft constructed as follows: Concentric copper rings at high r.p.m., the central ring being massive and fixed to the craft. The outer rings would therefore be centrifugally accelerated relative to the central ring.

I want somebody to explain to me what known force generates and perpetually sustains particle and nuclei spin, and where the energy source is.

Another curious physics fact that has escaped the would-be inventors of reactionless propulsion systems is that while Newton's Third Law of action and reaction forbids mechanical reactionless systems, Newton's law is generally invalid for electromagnetism and therefore electromagnetic drives. One example would be a charge moving perpendicular to a current-carrying wire. The current exerts a force on the charge, but not vice versa! A reactionless system would be entirely enclosed, producing no pollution and noise, and would appear to lose weight.

Cordially Yours,
A. H. Klotz

Physics Research
39 Simon St.
Babylon, N.Y. 11702

OK. I can accept that gravity is not a Force inseparable from mass—but inertia? *Let's see some experimental verification!*

Dear Mr. Baen:

I'm writing in support of Jerry Pournelle's diatribe on *Cultures Beyond the Earth* (Maruyama and Harkins, ed.). I'm a grad

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student in physics and I usually find Dr. Pournelle's article to be worth the price of admission by itself. In this case, since I had read most of the book (I quit on p. 91), he didn't tell me anything I hadn't essentially seen for myself, but the chance to watch a master dissect the amateur planet-builders (with one hand in his back pocket, no doubt) made up for it.

I've been interested in anthropology for years, and in SF for more years, so like Dr. Pournelle I was pleased to see a "scholarly" book on exosocial science. Like Dr. Pournelle I was disappointed—and, yes, angry—at what is being passed off as scholarship. For example, Maruyama, in his introduction, claims that physics is inapplicable to biology since classical thermodynamics always implies increasing homogeneity, and cannot explain the heterogeneity characteristic of life: "It simply begged the question by saying that a living organism is not an isolated system." (p. 8). Well, if he's talking about 19th century thermodynamics, admitting that the thermodynamics of isolated systems doesn't apply to life is just sensible; if he's talking about the twentieth century, he's flatly wrong. A man named Prigogene has shown rigorously that in an open system with energy flow (e.g. the earth), order or heterogeneity can increase without bound. His studies also indicate that the formation of the first life forms may have been due to the presence of chemical instabilities, much as the structure of convection cells can appear in an homogeneous body of water in the presence of an unstable temperature profile.

Some of the articles in *Cultures* betray not only an ignorance of the physical sciences (and perhaps a disinclination to remedy that ignorance), but ignorance of the social and biological sciences. The article on "First Contact" by Donald K. Stern, a sociology student, describes the idea of detecting advanced technologies by their radiation of waste heat in the deep infrared as absurd: "It is a little like trying to analyze another culture by its garbage." (p. 41). Ask an archaeologist—any archaeologist—how much he likes garbage heaps. Concentrated materials, quickly buried, rarely disturbed, layers in neat reverse chronological order. . . .And Stern's remark (p. 45) that "(life) had been evolving for 3,000 million years before the human race appeared; birds and mammals took only 200 million years. . . ." just doesn't bear comment.

Beyond that, for all their talk of heterogeneity, the writers in *Cultures* are pretty homogeneous in assuming a communistic future society. That's practically an article of faith in the social science community. Their chastisement of the astronomers for their treatment of Velikovsky sounds pretty hollow when you consider the social scientists' treatment of William Shockley or, for that matter, Robert Ardrey.

I could go on forever, but the point is this: the "serious" world is still thirty years behind SF. If you want imaginative speculation, informed by an understanding of the hard physical, biological and social facts that will constrain the future, without ideological stereotypes, don't look at the social scientists. Dr. Pournelle was too modest to say so, but *The Mote in God's Eye* is a better piece of scholarship—yes, scholarship, if that means the use of your brains and education—than *Cultures Beyond the Earth*. Larry Niven has written numerous stories on the social effects of organ banks, teleportation etc. that are worth more thought than this whole book.

That's why I read *Galaxy* instead of *Human Behavior*.

Sincerely,
Robert Hawkins

2185 S. Vine #524
Denver, CO 80210

Mr. Baen,

Would you ask Jerry Pournelle to write (sometime) a science fact article on the big bang theory? I've heard it banged around occasionally but I still know relatively little about it.

If he has no tendencies toward writing about this, could you refer me to some other source I could correspond with to answer a few of my questions? Please, — Thank you.

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By the way—
Questions:

1. Big Bang! Every thing moving away from source, and consequently every thing else, at tremendous rates of speed. Would this have effects on space travel?
2. Solar system sailing along through galaxy which sails glibly through universe. Is our galaxy eventually going to disperse? Or will it kinda hang together like planets in solar system?
3. Would it not be splendid (if we cared to go in that particular direction) to merely step off one sailing thing-a-majig and hold still until the next one comes flying by?

If feel I am quite tangled in my screwy information. Could you please straighten me out?

Yours respectually,
Sharon L. Bannon

1109 Granville Rd.
Westfield, Mass. 01085

Jerry was kind enough to reply at some length:

Dear Ms. Bannon,

Jim Baen has forwarded your letter to me.

I may one day write a column on the Big Bang; tell you what, when we get a few more letters requesting it, maybe I'll do it. The problem is that many readers already know or think they do, and there's a lot of material in print on the subject; I try to keep the column consistent with the title and deal with new stuff. I need an angle that hasn't been used.

Answering your specific questions:

What's receding is galaxies; thus the relative motions involved won't have much effect on space travel until we try to go to a different galaxy; and since there's about 100 billion stars in ours, it may take a while before we care to leave it!

Our galaxy isn't going to disperse. One supposed that over a long enough period of time the stars will slow down, due to interstellar gup like dust, and the galaxy will all compact together. This happens in something like a billion billion years, so not to worry; long before then, if the cosmologists are right, the receding galaxies will themselves have come to a halt and begin coming back together for another compacting and another Big Bang. There are problems with that theory, so if you don't care for it, you needn't accept it; but indeed our galaxy will hang together for precisely the same reason that the solar system hangs together.

Stepping off an object in space will not bring you to a halt; you will retain the same velocity. It is as if you jumped off an asteroid (there are many small enough so that you could jump off them)—you would still be travelling in approximately the same orbit as the asteroid, and have about the same velocity (well, speed, actually) relative to the Sun.

In science, as in fiction by a good author, the general rule is: "when in perplexity, read on!" We may not get all the answers, but we'll have a lot of them if *you* look for them.

Thank you for writing,

Sincerely,
Jerry Pournelle

Dear Mr. Baen,

First time loccer and all that. . .I started with *Galaxy* and then *If* three years ago, and have since watched you build them up into the best prozines on the market. You'll notice that I still speak of *If* in the present tense. I'm confident you'll find a way to revive it—we need the market.

Looking thru the Jan. issue. . .That Cover!!! There must be some way that you could reprint that, say 2′ × 3′ on light poster stock gloss for around five dollars. At least something without the logo &c Sternbach is easily the best spaceship artist (how's that for a subgenre?) ever.

As to the "free art" inside the cover—how about alternating established artists with those new to the field? Until *If* comes back, anyway.

Your graphics altogether have improved indescribably in the last year. Using a sort of

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flyleaf on your main feature is an excellent idea.

The science column was excellent. Perhaps you could have a Niven/Pournelle team article about one out of four issues. It could be used for articles about more sf-ish concepts; space drives, things like Bigger Than Worlds that Niven had in *Analog* some time back.

Back with the art—please give the full name of every artist on the page where his drawing appears. You wouldn't print the story without the author's name, would you?

I enjoy Spider's column—no criticism, just a friendly chat with somebody that read the book. Why waste $1.50? By the way, he did miss mention of the awards given Queen of Air & Darkness, but I won't tell anybody.

I'm not going to pass judgement on "We Who Are About To. . ." until I read the second half. So far, the writing is great but the story revolts me.

I enjoyed all of the shorts, especially O'Donnell's and Robinson's. And I miss the editorial. C'mon, friend, you must have something worth saying.

I also cast a vote for few serials. Few novels can stand the strain of serialization. They resemble the differences between made for TV movies where the commercial breaks are an integral part of the suspense, and normal films where the breaks merely distract and destroy continuity.

I close with hope for your future (continued) success. Just keep up that sense of the editor's presence, and I'll keep buying.

Sincerely,
Douglas S. Carey

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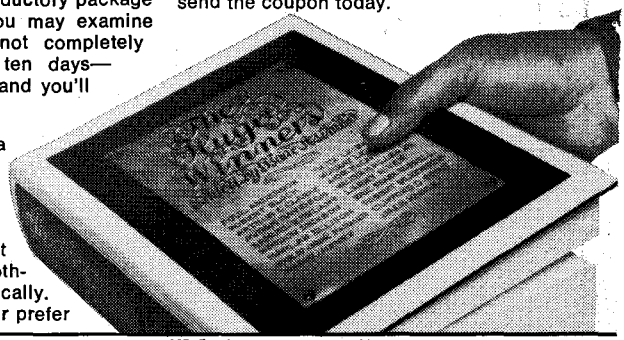

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